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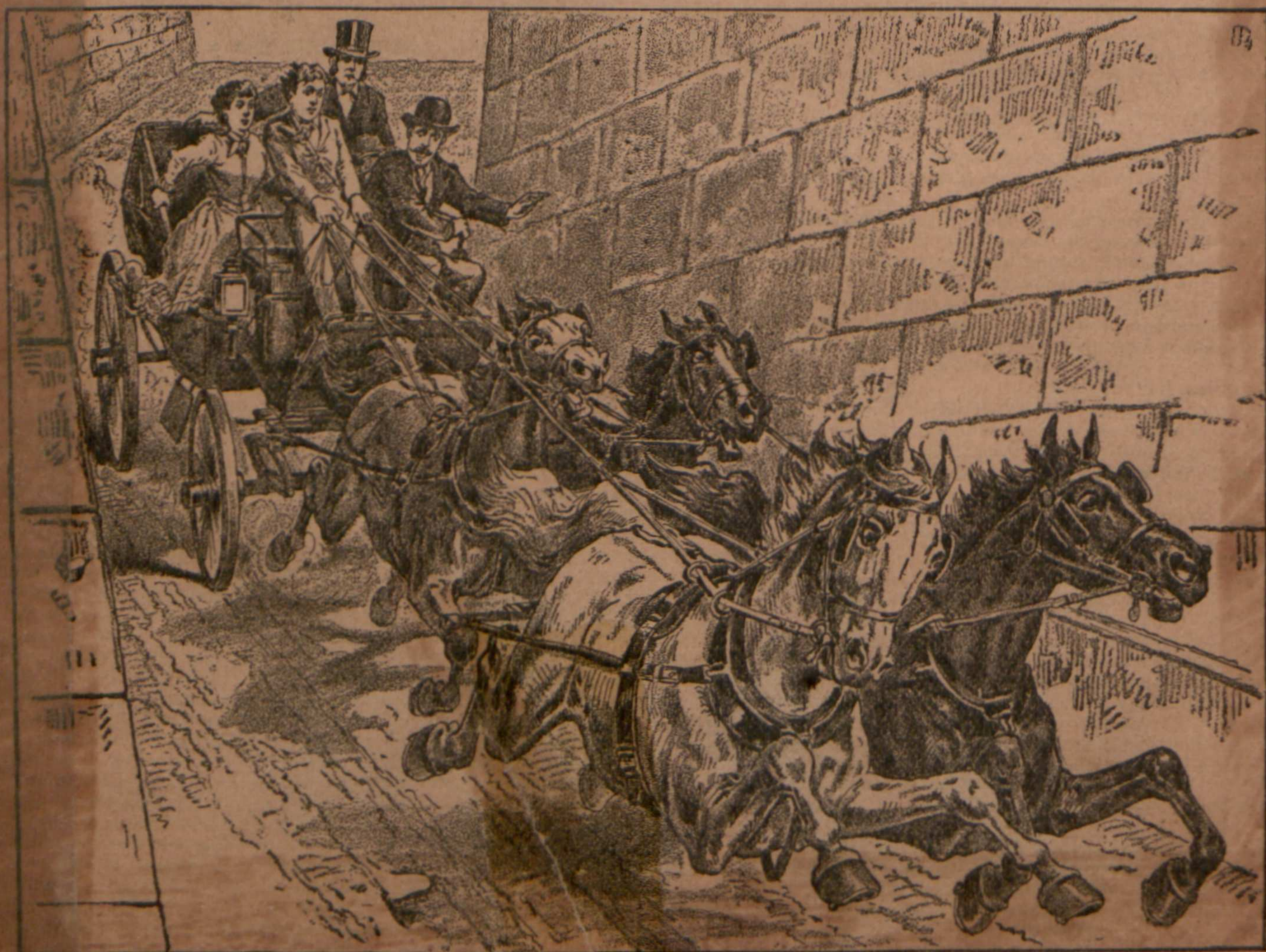
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BARE-BACK BILL;

Or, The Freaks and Fortunes of a Tow-Boy.

By JOHN F. COWAN.



THE DARING BOY STANDS ERECT, THE LINES IN HIS HANDS, THE MADDENED HORSES DASH DOWN THE SLOPE.

BARE-BACK BILL;

OR,

THE FREAKS AND FORTUNES OF A TOW-BOY.

By JOHN F. COWAN.

CHAPTER I.

BARE-BACK BILL AND MOTHER MINT.—A SPECULATIVE NEPHEW.

"Good-by, granny!"

The speaker was a youth of sixteen or thereabout, of supple figure and jaunty carriage, with bright, laughing, mischievous eyes, from which waggy seemed to be looking around for subject matter. His features were more regular than clean, and the scarcity of covering on his youthful form would certainly have entitled him to the name of Bare-Back Bill if that cognomen had not been given him for another reason. While speaking, he was standing on the threshold of a dilapidated one-story frame house on Ohio street, Buffalo, within which sat a shaky, wrinkled old woman, whose eyes were fast blearing into the dim light of the downhill of life.

"Good-by, Billy," she said, "and Heaven bless——"

The boy's mellow voice was already ringing in the distance, and the blessing which had begun so fervently died with a choking gurgle as if it had stuck in her throat. Her wrinkled chaps fell upon her skinny palms, and the watery eyes seemed, in their set stare, to be piercing through the dirty table-top into the depths of earth.

"Why should I sin my wicked soul worse than it is?" she croaked, with shaking head, every vestige of her assumed geniality and feeling vanishing with the disappearance of the boy. "Why should I pray Heaven to keep him when I'm prayin' Satan to take him from my way? When he's here my heart warms to him in spite of all, for he is good and kind to me and brings me money for the drawer (he doesn't know of that), and money for the cushion (he's ignorant o' that too), and money for my pouch—his own hard earnin's."

At each close of her last sentence she suited the action to the word with a propriety that would have delighted the fastidious Hamlet himself.

"Money for the drawer," she said, and her claw-like hands pulled out the drawer of the table before which she sat. It had compartments originally intended for the separation of knives, forks and spoons; now they were used for the distinction of values. In one was gold coin in chamois pouches—in another silver coins in flannel bags—in another bills in paper wrappers, and the old eyes flashed and glittered as they fell upon the treasure.

"Money for the cushion!" she said, and half-raising herself by placing one claw on the arm of the old wheeled chair in which she sat, she struck the pillow-like cushion with the other and chuckled in time to the musical jingle.

"Money for my pouch!" she said, pulling an old canvas pocket through a slit in her dirty gown, and shaking it before her. But a melancholy expression succeeded the avaricious triumph of her face as the rustling of stamps and the beggarly jingling of petty coin struck her ear.

"Not like the rest," she muttered. "Poor, poor, but 'tis all he gets—and he goes nearly naked to give it to me. Poor Billy, I love him and I hate him. I am paid—well paid—to keep him; I am paid—better paid to—kill him; but sometimes—sometimes," she said, holding the pouch up between her skinny, trembling hands, "these little savin's of the boy bind my heart firmer than either the other's gold."

A dark shadow fell upon the table, and with a half screech the miser slapped the still open drawer to its place, and seizing a crutch that leaned against the arm of her chair, turned at bay like a lioness about to be robbed of her cubs.

In the doorway, which had been left open by Bare-Back Bill, and forgotten by the sililoquizing crone, stood the tall, lank figure of a man in black.

"You idle vagabond," exclaimed the old woman in an exasperated tone. "What brings you stragglin' here? Confound your pictur'; does your play-actin' tache you no better manners than to open a lone woman's door without rapping?"

"Now, now, Aunt Mint, be not severe, be not unjust. 'My straggling footsteps have been thither led,' first by 'the duty and the loyalty' I owe to you."

"Fudge!" cried Mother Mint, viciously.

"Ah, well, 'duty despised and loyalty laughed at.' 'Yet that's not much.' Secondly, I came on business."

"Business!" she cried, sharply, wheeling her squeaking chair to face him. "Business with me?"

"With you," he said, coolly, entering and closing the door behind him. "Lend me your ears, and hear me for my cause. Was I to blame that you saw fit to air your unsuspected wealth with open portal? The door unbolted and thrown back; I came, I saw, I entered. Then blame not the bard—I mean the under-barred."

"See here, Joe Tivers," snapped Mother Mint.

"Tivers avaunt!" exclaimed the gentleman, with an expression of intense loathing. "Know, Aunt Mint, that the cognomen of Tivers is forever sunk in the abyss of deep oblivion—that I, springing above the debasing paths of, lowly life have wedded myself to the muses, and, assuming a style more consonant with high art, have superseded the petty designation Tivers by a loftier title—before you, you behold Armand Montcalm, from the theaters everywhere but the place of immediate advertising. I am——"

"I'll tell you what you are—you're a good-for-nothing chatter-box," cried the old woman; "and your room's a great hape better nor your company. A nod's as good as a wink to a blind horse if he has any dacency in him."

"Ha, very good indeed; 'age dimmeth not the luster of thy wit,'" said Mr. Montcalm, making a bow and taking a chair, but not deigning to take the hint; "quite a revivifying tag to a played-out proverb. By your leave, dear aunty, in our next afterpiece I shall adopt it as a gag."

"The divil gag you," cried his dear aunty. "Say what you want to say and go."

Mr. Montcalm dropped the facetious and complimentary, straightened his face, and went immediately to business.

"I am a man of few words," he said.

"You'd have deserved the reputation more if you hadn't said so."

"Be-a-u-tiful! Why, aunty, you astonish me. By your kind permission, I shall make a point of that in our next after——"

"Brimstone be your afterpiece—what d'ye want with me? Spake short and quick, or go."

"Brimstone for an afterpiece—dused effective, but cussedly unpleasant, I should say. Say no more, aunty. Be as brief as an interlude—through in one act. Came to see you 'bout this protege of yours."

"This what o' mine?" cried the crone, as if suspicious of insult.

"This boy—this Bare-Back Bill that you keep, though the people say that he keeps you."

"Let the people mind their own business, and they'll find enough to do," snapped the old woman, wickedly. "And what may you want with the boy?"

"Well, you see, aunty, I am for making a strike on my own hook, as they say in the expressive vulgate. I am about to put my best foot forward and step out from the great army of the unknown into the light of a recognized individuality."

"Spake English like a Christian, with your gibberish."

"Ah, well, since you will buckle fortune on my back—I wish to heavens you would——"

"A donkey's load 'twould be."

"Ha! Demmed good—I like the diamond brilliance of thy wit. I shall certainly make a note of that for use in our next. Well, briefly, aunty, I am getting up a theatrical and general show company of my own, to investigate the financial condition of the States and provinces. I am in need of talent—more so, as I have lately lost my best juvenile talent by the run away of my little Eloise, the pet of the public and the wonder of the world. Yes, aunty, no wonder you look disgusted—she's decamped as sure as hams are sugar-cured, and with her goes my main hope of success. Show's nothing without juvenile talent, and juvenile talent I must have. This boy Bill has talent. His name is famous all along the Erie. Bare-Back Bill—why the name's a 'Bill' itself. Ha-a-a! Very neat indeed—is it not? Pretty thing, good gag, first piece. Well, now, in plain Saxon—two-forty pace—this boy I have good cause to believe is a daring rider—expert gymnast—quite a singer—good break-down dancer—will need little training—'bears pent within his little bulk the germ of fame and fortune.' Shall I have him? Will you apprentice him to the art exponent of all arts (new version)? Hem! Shall this 'looped and windowed raggedness' be abated and his form be 'clothed in rich habiliments'? Nay, look not reproachfully on mine, for 'fortune yet hath smiles in store for me.' Now, short and sharp as a torpedo, will you allow me to take this Bare-Back Bill from the tow-path and put him on the path to 'fame and fortune'? Will you make an actor of him?"

The old woman, during all this rattling mass of digression and quotation, had grown very restless, and was inclined to interrupt the glib flow of her grand nephew's tongue; but the tongue was superior to interruptions, and its rapidity made such an interference with its functions a difficult and doubtful matter.

But toward the end of the gentle Montcalm's speech her appearance had greatly changed, and she seemed to pay deep attention to the words of the eloquent Armand.

"See, Joe Tivers," she said, leaning toward him, and speaking in a low, impressive tone, "if you weren't such a vagabond scapegrace I'd be inclined to hearken to you. I want the boy—removed!"

Armand Montcalm started at the dramatic emphasis with which this word was hissed forth, and looked with something of wonder at the wrinkled face and eyes freed from their usual driveling expression, and strong and firm in purpose.

"By Jove! aunty," he said, "that concentration was admirable. You should have been an artist."

"Stop your jabber!" cried the old woman, with sudden force that was another cause of admiration to the appreciative Montcalm. "Be silent, and listen to me. Suppose that your Aunt Mint has reason for wishing the removal of this boy from the neighborhood of Buffalo—of the United States—of the world; for that matter—What are ye startin' for like a stuck pig? Supposin', I say, that I had good reasons—is it the business of you or any other vagabond what my reasons are?"

"I am compelled to answer your polite inquiry in the negative," said the unruffled Montcalm, with a bow, for he scented emolument here, and the wealth he had accidentally seen displayed was very ravishing to the eyes of an heir presumptive, scapegrace though he were.

"Well," continued Mother Mint, "supposin'"—and then she paused and resumed, musingly. "If this Billy was a common boy he might stay here with me till eternity's bells would ring; but he's not a common boy; he's too stirring; he makes himself too remarkable, and my double dealin' 'll be found out by both. Ha, Joe Tivers! why do you sit there staring at me as if I was a she-wolf? What do you listen to a dotin' body's mumbblings for? Haven't I a right to speak to myself in my own house? Leave it! Go! You're not fit to take care of the child you ask for. You couldn't manage him. You are too fond o' crookin' your elbow; your tongue is too long and too fond o' wagging."

"I agree with you, aunty," said the ever smooth Montcalm. "I am a compilation of blemishes; but under the training of a vigorous intellect like yours—"

"Bah! blarney!" exclaimed the old woman, scornfully; but her further words were hindered by the stopping of a close carriage opposite the little paned window; and as a liveried coachman sprang to the ground and opened the door of the vehicle for the egress of a heavily-veiled lady, the crone turned quickly, fiercely, to her attentive nephew.

"Go!" she cried; "away with you! You must not be seen here. Out of the back door; you can reach the street through the alley way."

She watched the young man's exit through the door leading to the back of the house, and then turned her attention to the front. With nervous hands she removed a bottle from the table and set it beneath her skirt upon the floor, pulling the teapot into suggestive proximity to the cup and saucer. Had it not been for these little arrangements she might have noticed the stealthy figure of Armand Montcalm flitting back from the passage and gliding into the little bedroom at the back.

A slight rapping sounded on the door.

"Come in, please!" said Mother Mint, and the veiled lady entered.

CHAPTER II.

THE RUNAWAY.

Meantime Bare-Back Bill proceeded to the canal. On his way he saw a slight and slightly dressed youth of handsome countenance, with a head of curly hair, as golden red as the setting sun, sitting on the projecting edge of a board, near the canal, with a small banjo in a green bag upon his knees.

"What's the row, sonny?" asked Bill.

"I have run away," answered the strange boy, with a sudden confidence.

"What's your name?" asked Bill.

The boy's face reddened, and there was an awkward pause.

Bill relieved him with his usual blunt generosity.

"Never mind, if it's a delicate question. I've heard say runaways never like to tell their cognom's. We'll git a name for you. I like you, young fellow, and don't like to be hollerin' to ye like's if you was an ownerless dog. We goes all by nicknames. Mine's Bare-Back Bill, and I hardly know myself by any other. I used to fight ag'in' it at first, coz I thought it was a coz; I didn't sport much clothes; but, lor' bless ye, I found out it was because I was kinda fond o' sportin' my figure instead by standin' up on my hoss when other fellers squatted and lay lazy on his mane."

"Well, give me what name you like," said the boy.

"Well, fellers o' your complexion and style o' hair we generally call Redney, but that's not good enuff for you. 'Sides, there's Redneys enuff floatin' round to lamp-light the Erie from Black Rock to Schenectady."

"Call me Rhodie, then."

"That'll do it; Red Rhodie, then. A rum label, too, and not like to be matched easy. Now, Rhodie, we are chums. What did you run away for?"

"Montcalm treated me badly."

"Why didn't you go to your folks?"

"Didn't like them—ran away from them, too."

"Why?"

"Heard them say I wasn't their child, but a foundling, and that they were going to use me as theirs to get their hands on property that didn't belong to them nor me, but to some other child."

"And you run away for that? That was foolish," said Bill, sagely.

"What?" asked the boy, in innocent surprise, "do you think it would be right to steal another child's money?"

"Well, no," admitted Bill, reluctantly, for the ethics of the canal were not quite so strict as those of more select society.

"So it was the child you thought of?"

"Yes," answered the boy, promptly. "I knew music, and dancing, and singing, that I shouldn't have known if I had been left a foundling. I could make my living, perhaps the other child couldn't, because I had stolen its education. Don't you see?"

Bare-Back Bill could hardly see, for his eyes filled with tears as he turned them on the little moralist.

"Give's your hand, Red Rhodie," he said. "You're a patent pressed brick; and Bare-Back Bill'll never forget you for thinkin' of that child. I like your pluck, I like your independence, I like your plain talk, and I'll be jiggered, little feller, if I don't stick to you like a lock gate to a miter-sill."

A pause, during which both were seemingly in deep meditation, when Bill suddenly said:

"Here's where my boat lays. Now, Rhodie, where did you think of steering for when you ran away?"

"New York, if I could ever manage to get there. I have heard Montcalm say it was the best place for real talent; and I have talent," said the little artist, with proud consciousness.

Bare-Back Bill looked at the little self-praiser and laughed, the artlessness of the artist was refreshing to his more worldly mind, but he indorsed the assertion and took courage to make an addition to it.

"You have talent, Rhodie," he said, "and—so have I! There, I'll go with you to New York. Have you any money?"

"Montcalm never gave me much," said Rhodie. "I have only two dollars."

"Two dollars!" cried Bill. "A dollar apiece, that's heaps, anyway, and if I can get my pay out of the cap'n of our old tub when we reach the Sixteens, we'll be as rich as Jews. We can stow away in a night boat at Troy, and live snug on bread and cheese till we git to York."

"What do you mean by the 'Sixteens'?" asked Rhodie.

"The locks at West Troy," answered Bill.

"But if we should get nothing to do?" said Rhodie, doubtfully.

"Bah! Rhodie," cried Bill. "Are you losing heart a'ready? Why, York's too big a place to starve in. There's theaters at every corner, and we've both got talent."

The simple candor of the youngster had infected the oldster badly.

The terms for Rhodie's passage were easily arranged by Bill with the good-natured captain. No money was required from his small stock, his music being considered equivalent sufficient.

The day was bright and beautiful, and the hearts of the intending adventurers beat high with hopeful excitement. Rhodie lay dreaming of the future, half-covered from the sun by a tarpaulin on deck, Bill was with his horses, singing like a thrush, the two or three hands smoking quietly, when on nearing Tonawanda their quietude was broken by the unusual circumstance of an open carriage, drawn by four horses, tearing like mad along the tow-path behind them.

"Hide, Rhodie!" cried Bill.

One of the men caught the tarpaulin and threw it completely over Rhodie. On came the carriage at a thundering pace, sending the dust high in the air behind it in whirling clouds. Soon they overhauled and hailed the boat. There were too gentlemen and a lady, all apparently excited.

"Has a runaway girl applied to you for passage?" hurriedly asked the gentleman who held the reins, "or have you seen one pass this way to-day?"

"No, sir, not one," answered the captain, truthfully, and his answer was repeated by the men and the captain's wife.

With a cry of disappointment and a muttered imprecation the driver laid his whip to the horses and dashed back again like the wind, leaving the lazy canal boat far behind in the clapping of your hands.

The boatman who had covered Rhodie seeing no effort of the boy to throw the covering aside, went and plucked the heavy tarpaulin away. The boy was deadly white and trembling violently.

"Why, what's the matter, little fellow?" said the boatman, in a tone of alarm, that brought the captain and his wife to the spot.

"Why, you've about smothered him, Tom," said the captain, standing the boy on his feet. "Don't be afraid, youngster; it wasn't the police. Though, maybe, it was that actor-fellow. Did you know his voice?"

"Yes."

"Was it him?"

"No, no," stammered the boy, in affright.

"What's up, Rhodie?" cried Bare-Back Bill, seeing the commotion from the tow-path; "don't be skeared."

"Take the little fellow down and put him in a berth," said the captain to his wife.

"No, no," he cried, as the woman took his hand; "let me ashore—I want to speak to Bill."

Good-naturedly the steersman ran the boat to the bank, and the boy leaping lightly ashore and running ahead, vaulted on to a horse and leaning over to Bare-Back Bill, said, in an agitated voice:

"They're after me."

"Awh, you're crazy!" was the consoling answer. "They wasn't cops, I tell you, and old match-shanks the actor wasn't there. Sides they asked for a gal. What's the matter with you?"

"*They're after me!*" was the answer, so positively given that Bill turned and stared at the speaker in surprise.

"Why, Rhodie," he said, "how can they be after you when they're askin' for a gal—unless you're a—"

"No, no!" cried Rhodie, half angrily. "You don't understand. I am thin and small and used to play girl characters. They think I would dress so to escape them. But I knew better—I knew better," he said, with something like a chuckle of pride at his own foresight that rather puzzled Bill. "These boats are dreadfully slow," he continued; "couldn't we leave now and cut through the woods to a railway station? I am used to traveling fast. We can go as far as my money goes, and then I'll earn more."

"This'd be a poor place to cut it, Rhodie. Let's go on to Lockport. I'll try and git a feller to take my team there, and mebbe the old man'll give me a few stamps when I tell him how it is. Don't be frightened, Rhodie boy. I'd run their bloody old truck and double team into the canal if they try to touch you. Bare-Back Bill's yer backer, and who're you afeard of?"

Talking thus—doubts on the one side and assurances on the other—they neared Lockport, passed the quarries and turned the bend toward the locks. Here, with the busy city opening up before them, a feeling of safety came to the young fugitive, but suddenly, as a flight of eagles swooping on their prey, the sound of their approach being muffled by the bend in the canal, the four-in-hand dashes alongside the team of the two young riders, and Bill, in a flashing glance, sees the actor Montcalm, now added to the occupants of the carriage, snatch Rhodie from his horse with his long skeleton claws and cast him roughly in the bottom of the carriage, which whirled away along the tow-path without the least lessening of speed.

"The fools—the fools!" cried Bill, fiercely. "They are rushing to the locks. They will kill him."

With a rapidity of action which nothing but practice and an impulsive spirit could produce, he threw his traces from the hooks of the hames, and with a whoop and a yell, as wild as that of an Indian, started in hot pursuit.

The carriage, a high-backed landaulet, was whirling on, rocking and reeling from the endeavors of the driver to keep command of his frightened horses and avoid the straggling teams he met, reeling from stone and hollow, for wheels were not intended for the narrow track they entered.

Beneath the broad-planked platform of the square they enter, waking the dismal thunder of its echoes, that seem to roll along the sluggish waters in an ominous hiss.

"Bare-Back Bill! Bare-Back Bill!" is the hailing cry that echoes from tow-path and platform as the tow-boy dashes after the carriage. Under the broad bridge he disappears also out into the light again, as the driver of the carriage, seeing his mistake and the danger of the crowded, stair-like steep, tries to check his now unmanageable horses.

His efforts are futile. He must either go onward, down the locks, plunge into the canal, rushing in whirling eddies down to

the filling of the upper lock, or dash himself and freight against the rocky wall.

The people above cry out with alarm. The drivers and boatmen, all the way down the slope of the five locks, burst into yells of warning and maledictions on the madman, for such they deem him. He cannot help it. The animals are out of his control. The fate of him and his companions seems inevitable. The maddened horses are plunging toward the catastrophe.

Suddenly a wild cry is heard, and the wild figure of a boy, standing erect upon his horse, dashes like the wind, from the dark shadow of the bridge—dashes in a couple of terrified bounds close to the back of the imperiled vehicle.

One wild shout as the youthful figure whirls in the air like a hoop, and the snorting horse goes on alone.

The next instant the daring boy is seen erect in the front of the carriage.

The lines are in his strong-nerved hands, his face is deadly pale, his eyes flashing, his livid lips clenched tight.

This is seen, as if by a lightning flash, as the wild figure, and the frenzied horses, and the frightened inmates of the vehicle, to be saved or sacrificed, dash madly down the slope.

CHAPTER III.

CATASTROPHE AND SALVATION.—A RIDE FOR FREEDOM.

It was a wild and desperate task that the impulsive Bill had undertaken, but his nerve was equal to it. The drivers and boatmen fled before the plunging horses or took refuge on the gates of the locks or the decks of the canal boats which were being locked through.

With a whirl and a roar the bounding carriage passed the first four gates and sped toward the fifth, which was just being closed. The lady in the carriage was screaming in a wild affright. The men were dumfounded. The boy on whose account all this trouble was caused crouched in the bottom of the vehicle, for Bare-Back Bill at the instant of his unceremonious appearance as a passenger had called at the top of his shrill voice:

"Sit low, Rhodie, sit low!" and the child obeyed the order.

The heavy beam which formed the lever of the gate swung around across the tow-path, and as ill-luck would have it a couple of mule teams got entangled between the end of it and the embankment.

A crash was inevitable, and Bare-Back Bill saw the danger at a glance. He clenched his teeth and nerved his arm for the worst.

"Be ready for a jump, Rhodie!" he cried. "There's agoin' to be an all-fired smash up!"

Scarcely had the hissing words passed his lips when the smash-up came. The leading horses madly leaped the beam, the wheelers fell in the endeavor to do so, dragged down by the plunge of their predecessors, and the carriage was dashed to splinters on the obstruction.

A wild shriek sounded above the cries of excitement as the lady and her gentlemen companions were pitched into the rapidly-filling locks, and sank amid the muddy whirling waters.

Rhodie and Bare-Back Bill, being in the front of the carriage, were by the sheer force of the collision thrown forward uninjured on the prostrate horses, and as the vast crowd of lockmen and boat hands rushed to the assistance of the struggling people in the water, Bill caught his young companion from the ground and threw him on one of the frightened leaders, which was standing with dilated nostrils and palpitating flanks, and severing the traces with his knife jumped on the other himself, standing erect as was his wont, and with a shrill cry dashed off along the tow-path, urging the appropriated beasts to the top of their speed.

Yells of admiration and encouragement rewarded his daring and promptness, though no one in all that cheering crowd had the slightest idea of the cause of this strange scene.

"Hooray for Bare-Back Bill! Bully boy, Bill!" rang along the canal, and Bill waved his tattered hat back in salute, and yelled in joyous defiance.

"Houpla! G'lang! How's this for high? Keep up your pluck, Rhodie, old boy," he continued, breathlessly, as he looked at the slight form of his young companion clinging tremblingly to the mane of the horse. "There's money bid for us yet. Here we are, started with circus stock a'ready—a spakin' team, and got fair and square, too. Fair exchange is no robbery. We gave 'em a duck apiece for their two horses. Ha! ha! ha! G'lang!"

And on they went at a spanking rate without either having the remotest idea of where they were going, or how the scrape was to end—no idea in fact but to get out of the reach of pursuit, and to Bill at least the objects of pursuit and flight were as dark and mysterious as a prize puzzle.

It seemed that the people at the locks had sufficient to attend

to in the rescue of the lady and men from the lock without interesting themselves in the flight of the youngsters. Bare-Back Bill slackened his speed on seeing this, for both the horses and themselves were out of breath.

"We must save ourselves a bit while we can, Rhodie," he said, "for we'll have to scoot it lively when them fellows gits themselves wrung out. What was it all about, Rhodie? Who was the dark feller? Who was the woman?"

"They always said they were my parents," was Rhodie's answer.

"And you're a foundlin', Rhodie?"

"So I overheard them say."

"And you're runnin' away so they can't make you rich?" said Bill, half musingly, as if mystified by this strange conceit of his young traveling companion. "That's what knocks me, you know, when every other feller, man and woman, is a runnin' after riches like mad, that you should be dustin' it away from your fortin' and your folks."

"They ain't my folks, though."

"Well, what matter, Rhodie, they are folks, ain't they? and a fortin's a fortin'—that's what sticks in my gizzard."

"Perhaps my real folks are better and richer than they are," said the youngster, with a vague expression of pride.

"Ha! ha!" laughed Bare-Back Bill. "Go it, rocks. Nothin' like a stiff upper lip. Quite right to praise up your own stock, Rhodie. P'rhaps you're the Queen o' Spain or young Napoleon in disguise. Eh, Rhodie? Quite mysterious, ain't it? Sounds like a newspaper novel, don't it now?"

"Oh, Bill, my banjo's left behind in the boat!" cried Rhodie, suddenly, in a grieved and startled manner. "How'll I make money?"

"By jolly, that's so," cried Bill, just as sorrowfully. "But don't fret 'bout that, old feller, we'll wait at the first stoppin' place, or leastwise at Knoxville, till the old man overtakes us. Never git along in the world without the fryin'-pan."

So on, past factories and cooperies, and lumber yards, and boat yards, they went out into the open country, discussing their future prospects in the battle of life with all the sanguine confidence of inexperience. According to their rose-colored speculations fortune and fame were inevitable to persons of their immense talent, and projects for the pleasant spending of the fortune were more discussed than the means of attaining it. But there is "many a slip 'twixt the cup and the lip," as the young adventurers found out.

CHAPTER IV.

RESCUED FROM THE LOCK.—SCIENCE TO THE CAPTURE.

Meanwhile the unfortunate personages so violently ejected from the carriage, were with difficulty fished from the lock in a deplorable and half-suffocated condition. The lady was immediately removed to an adjacent hotel, suffering greatly from the nervous shock she had sustained. The gentleman who owned the wreck of what had once been a carriage, cursed his luck in forcible terms, to the amusement of the canalers, and vowed vengeance dire on the head of the audacious Bare-Back Bill. Our dramatic friend, Joe Tivers, alias Armand Montcalm, shook his lank and dank frame like a Newfoundland, and bolted instantly for a saloon to equalize things by wetting the inside as well as the out.

"Who is this daring young scoundrel?" demanded the dripping carriage owner of one of the lock hands.

"Bare-Back Bill," was the answer.

"I don't want a nick-name," said the man, angrily. "I want a real name."

"Keep on wantin', mister, and maybe you'll get it," was the careless and crusty answer. "Bare-Back Bill is all the handle you're like to find for that youngster 'long this mud creek, I reckon. Ain't it long enough? What d'ye want? A name as long as a tow-line, eh?"

Laughter followed this, and the anxious inquirer's anger and fluster became greater.

"This is robbery—horse-stealing!" cried the stranger. "This thief must be overtaken. Who will help me to capture this runaway horse-thief?"

As the man looked around in doubt from one sun-browned face to another, a smooth voice whispered in his ear:

"They have got too long a start; their horses are superior to these old prads. You cannot catch them. The telegraph's the thing to overtake them."

"You are right, my friend, and I am thankful to you for your suggestion," said the stranger, turning to Armand Montcalm; "the telegraph's the thing. Let us seek an office."

The office was sought, and found, and the following message sent to the authorities of several cities and villages on the line of the canal:

"LOCKPORT, June —, 18—.

"Intercept and arrest two runaway boys traveling along the Erie tow-path, or roads in its vicinity, with span of chestnut carriage horses. The larger youth is a tow-boy, roughly dressed, and passes by the name of Bare-Back Bill. The smaller one is slim and girlish-looking, and more decently attired. The horses are stolen."

"How will that do?" asked the message-sender.

"First-rate," said Armand Montcalm; "only——"

"Only what?"

"The description of the little 'un. Wouldn't it have 'made assurance doubly sure' to have gone into particulars?"

"No; I have my reasons for not doing so," was the somewhat curt answer, and the message went accordingly. "Good-day, a—Mister a—Montcalm," said the stranger, as if with a painful exertion of memory. "I am thankful for your assistance, however sorry I may feel that my child should, by youthful willfulness, have fallen into the reach of the contaminina——. I mean, the peculiar society you represent. Good-day, sir."

The pale visage of Joseph Tivers, alias Armand Montcalm, flushed. It was a very slight flush, but a very respectable one for a face like his, which since childhood had never been adorned with the grace of a flush, unless from the effects of the flowing bowl.

The stranger whirled himself angrily out of the telegraph office, and started away with savage strides. Mr. Armand Montcalm, on the contrary, strolled up to the wicket with the coolness of a salamander, and filling a blank, handed it in for dispatch. It was addressed to the same authorities as the one that preceded, and ran thus:

"LOCKPORT, June —, 18—.

"My servant, in a dispatch a few minutes ago, made a blunder. The boys he ordered arrested are guiltless of any crime, horses being sent on by me in their charge. I will follow immediately. Let them pass; or ask them to wait until my arrival, if considered necessary. Need not answer—I'll be there.

ARMAND MONTCALM.

"Manager Great American Theatrical and Circus Combination."

"There!" cried Armand, rubbing his hands gleefully, as he heard the "subtle clicks" rattling off his countermand; "if I don't have them for my 'contaminating' society, I'll be hanged if he shall. Lord! what money's in those two youngsters, if I could only get them both together! Not to speak of the chance of making off the heirship. By Jove! it's an astonishing and gay joke that Mother Mint should have so much money to leave to her Sally's son, and no one know about it. Armand, my fortune favored youth, thou art in luck, and the sooner thou art in a railroad car the better. Armand, my boy, put money in thy purse."

In pursuance of this latter idea, the talented Armand carried his stately person grandly from the depot of electricity to the depot of steam, and engaged a passage with the intention of heading off the young fugitives.

About the same time, the captain of the boat from which Bare-Back Bill had been forced to desert, having recovered his horse and secured another driver, ran through the locks, and started down at a double-quick speed.

"We'll overhaul them before they get where the feller's telegraph'll head them," he said.

CHAPTER V.

HEMMED ON ALL SIDES.

Bare-Back Bill and his companion sped along for several miles, when they became convinced that they were pursued. To avoid being captured, they abandoned the tow-path and soon discovered that they were on some extensive private estate, studded with fruit and ornamental trees, and Bill, true to his Arab principles, helped himself and companion to the ripened cherries as he passed beneath the pendant boughs. This delay was certainly foolish in their circumstances, but it was a piece with all the other characteristic acts of the free and easy Bill. Even timorous Rhodie was lulled into fancied security by the surroundings and willingly quenched the thirst caused by excitement with the luscious fruit.

"Isn't this a beautiful place, Bill?" said Rhodie, nodding his head toward a flower-gemmed vista, stretching through the trees. "I could live here forever."

"Bang-up place, Rhodie," said the other, pitching into the cherries, or rather pitching the latter into him as he looked around. "I'm jiggered, though, if this here isn't old man Judge Cornell's hang-out. Why, Rhodie," (very mysteriously) "do you know that they call this here the haunted farm?"

"Why?" asked the boy.

"The fellers on the canal say, and so do the neighbors, that there's a woman walks about here at night huntin' for children to steal. They say she stole a little girl o' the judge's one't, a good many years ago, and him and his wife has never got over it since."

"Hello! you!" roared a savage voice through the trees. "What are you doing there?"

"Eatin' cherries," cried Bill, as he saw a serving man rushing toward them with a heavy whip, followed by two fierce dogs that made the air ring as their glaring eyes fell on the intruders.

"I'll eat you!" bellowed the man in a blunderbore tone of voice, that was anything but prepossessing, and was savagely indorsed by the dogs.

"Well, you mightn't, but your dogs might, so we'll give you a little hoof-bail for our future appearance," cried Bill, dropping from his standing position to a sitting one. "Steady, Rhodie. Don't be afraid. Our under-pinnin' is good. Let 'em catch us if they can."

Unthinkingly, he turned back the way they had come, but soon heard the voices of their pursuers from the canal making hill and glade ring with cries of "stop thief!"

"Darn their skins, but they're mighty fond o' slinging their compliments," he cried, turning away eastward, at right-angles to their former course.

The dogs rushed panting in their track not far behind, no longer giving mouth, but ominously silent. The hearts of both runaways beat fast. They heard the counter challenges of the men from the canal and the servant who had been distanced by his four-footed companions, and mistook the rush of the others for that of the horses.

Suddenly, through the open trees, a high and solid stone wall broke upon the sight of the boys. Hope left the heart of Rhodie, but there was no hopelessness in that of Bare-Back Bill. He was naturally sanguine, and danger had a fascination for him.

"P'raps that's too risky for you, Rhodie," he said. "You haul up close alongside of it. I'll clear it and lift you over. One hooss'll have to do us. Hoopla! G'lang!"

With this favorite urging cry, he pressed his knees to his horse's sides and dashed at the wall, clearing it by the thickness of a lath. His companion rode nervously to the foot of the wall and called as loudly as he could for help. The dogs were bounding forward with frothing mouths and gleaming fangs.

"Quick, Bill, quick, for mercy's sake!"

"On deck, Rhodie," cried the tow-boy, appearing with a bound on top of the wall, but the child noticed that his face was bleeding, and that he reeled as he stood.

"Are you hurt, Bill?" cried Rhodie, in an anxious tone.

"No—only a somerset I didn't calculate on," he said. "Come quick, give's yer hands and jump. There comes the whole rag-tag and bob-tail."

Rhodie reached up and caught the boy's outstretched hands, and he was swinging the light form over the wall when one of the ferocious dogs, in obedience to the servant's word, made a flying leap and caught the little fellow's clothes.

The hold of Bare-back Bill was broken by the sudden check and he fell backward on the outer side of the wall while Rhodie was plucked heavily to the ground and pinned there by the paws of the four-footed monsters. The human hounds rushed up to the spot but seemed more intent on capturing the other boy than on saving the one before them from his perilous situation, and the dogs gave every indication of dining off the trembling, nearly lifeless form.

"What is the matter here?" cried a handsome-looking gentleman, coming hastily forward with a cutting whip in his hands.

"Horse thieves—runaways," cried the water-soaked men from the canal.

"Young shavers a pillaging the orchard a horseback, sir," said the servant, raising his whip to strike the "shaver" captured.

"Stop!" cried the gentleman, knocking the fellow's whip aside. "This is a stupid blunder. For shame, you brute; would you set dogs on to worry a poor child like that. Back, you cursed curs."

The dogs flew yelping from the cutting blows of the speaker's whip, and catching Rhodie he raised him and put back the clustering hair from his blood-stained face, for he also had suffered by his fall. His clothes were bloody also, showing that the dog's teeth had caught more than cloth.

"Who are you, child?" said the gentleman, kindly; but no answer passed the white lips, and the eyes that met his were fixed with a stare that meant fright if it meant anything.

"Can you speak? Can you hear me?" the gentleman repeated.

Still there was no answer.

"Oh, he's a cunnin' dodger, if he is young," said one of the crowd, an ununiformed village constable, who had just arrived.

"But we can tell you who he is, judge."

"Tell me, then."

"He's a youngster that's run away from his folks at Lockport with Bare-Back Bill, the canal-boy, and took two of his father's horses with him."

"Is this true?" said the gentleman, giving the youngster a gentle shake to arouse him out of his seeming stupor.

If any answer was likely to be given it was hindered by a tumult on the other side of the stone wall, and loud cries of recognition and triumph in which the name of Bare-Back Bill frequently recurred.

It was the gang of pursuers who had gone around by the bridge and come on the tow-boy getting up half-stunned from his fall.

"Bill! Bill!" screamed Rhodie. "Oh, gentlemen, it is my friend. They have caught and will kill or imprison him, and he did it only for me, to save me from Montcalm."

"Ha! ha! Bare-back," crowed the crowd outside, "we've got you now."

"Nary a time," was the more triumphant crow that rang forth as the irrepressible Bill appeared on the broad top of the wall with the bound of a Japanese acrobat. "Not by twenty-five stems o' cherries, if Bare-Back knows hisself, and he thinks he does. Good-by, Rhodie. They can't hurt you. I must cut my lucky. I'll git you safe, never fear."

As he rattled out these flying words he took to his heels along the broad coping of the wall toward the canal, and the would-be captors ran along on either side with yells of disappointment, throwing stones and sticks in hopes of knocking him off, and snapping whip-lashes at his flying feet to trip him up, but in such a bouncing and irregular manner did he go that no missile of consequence hit him, and the whip-lashes formed a sort of intermittent skipping rope, which he seemed highly to appreciate.

Rhodie, excited by this strange chase of his friend, burst away along the foot of the wall after the others, and was followed by the owner of the grounds on which he was trespassing. Arrived at the outer end of the wall where it ran into the water, Bare-Back Bill, with a wild yell of defiance that would have done credit to a Modoc, sprang high into the air, and revolving hoop-fashion in a double somersault, disappeared like a dolphin in the center of the canal.

In a couple of moments he reappeared close to the other bank, and scrambling up from the water mounted the high beyond the tow-path by the aid of projecting tree roots, and disappeared over the bluff with a bit of pantomime which, it must be confessed, was neither masonic nor modest.

His captured companion with a cry tried to break past the men to follow him, but tripped on a stone or root and fell heavily.

CHAPTER VI.

THE GHOST OF CORNELL HOUSE.

"The child is badly hurt," said the judge, as he lifted Rhodie from the sod. "He looks like a runaway, but not like a thief, and has likely been led astray by that wild boy that escaped. Carry him to the house; he needs attention."

"But, judge, I've got as good's a warrant for him," said the constable, discontentedly, producing the telegram requiring the detention of the two boys. "He's wanted bad—he is."

"Well, tell who ever wants him that Judge Cornell will be responsible for him," said the other. "You can take the horses in charge and go after the other boy, who undoubtedly is to blame for their being stolen."

Evening was closing in and the lamps were lit in the wide hall and vestibule, and were twinkling from many of the windows as the judge and his servant bore Rhodie in and laid him on the marble floor. Domestic were already crowding out to see the cause of the confusion, and with them came the judge's wife, a tall lady, possessing as much of the beauty of her sex as her husband did of his. Her form was stately, her features noble, with a tinge of sadness, her eyes dark and lustrous, and her hair luxuriant, with silver threads here and there, setting off its natural jetteness.

The judge ordered water and other restoratives, and the servants hastened to obey him, while he rapidly ran over the circumstances of the boy's capture in the orchard in answer to his wife's inquiries. But after the first glance she caught of the young face she seemed to hear no word of what he said, but gazed with a fascinated stare on the pale features, and her lips moved nervously as if in soundless self-communing.

"Strange! Strange! Strange!" were the words they seemed to form, and calling eagerly for a vinaigrette she held it to the child's nostrils, while her husband sprinkled water on his face.

The simple applications had the effect desired. With a shuddering sigh the respiration returned, the eyes opened on the crowd in wild wonderment, and the judge's lady betrayed a repetition of the same emotional signs which had followed her first view of the young trespasser.

"Speak, child," she said, eagerly. "What is your name?"

"Rhodie—Rhodie Melton," was the answer, "Rhodie?" the lady said. "That is a strange name, it sounds like a girl's."

"Oh, no, madam," answered the boy, readily. "It is a pet name for Rodney."

"How old are you?"

"Going on sixteen."

"Where did you come from?"

"Lastly from Buffalo."

"And where before that?" asked the judge.

The boy had heard him addressed by his title in the orchard, and started with terror at the sound of his voice.

"I'd rather not tell," he cried, with a tremble, striving to rise. "Oh, please, do let me go. I did nothing wrong, only to try to get away from a cruel man that beat me like a slave."

"The child is frightened, dear," said the judge's wife; "and his clothes are wet. Let Catherine put him to bed. He can tell us all his story when he is calmer in the morning."

"Oh, I am thankful to you, lady, but I cannot stay still morning. I must get away or they will find me. I wish to seek for Bill, the tow-boy—he's my only friend."

At a sign from the lady the sturdy housekeeper caught the unwilling youth in her powerful arms and bore him up the wide staircase, unheeding his kicks and struggles and entreaties to be set at liberty.

"You must take off your clothes and I will give you a night-dress," said the housekeeper, on arriving in a bedroom with her prisoner.

"Hush! What's that!" exclaimed the boy, holding up his hand.

A very faint sound of tinkling music stole up from the outside, or rather seemed to float around in the air; now near the window and then far away. Catherine turned pale and began to mutter pious ejaculations. Rhodie bent eagerly toward the sound. After a few moments it ceased, and the boy peered out into the gloom, but he could discern nothing.

"It is some one playing below," he said more to himself than to his companion, but she answered it.

"No, darlin', Heaven be good to us, it's the gray sperrit that comes whenever there's a female child in Cornell House!"

"The gray spirit—a female child!" exclaimed Rhodie, as the words of Bare-Back Bill rushed to his memory.

He turned toward the woman, but she suddenly uttered a shriek, and pointing toward the window turned and fled from the room, making the house ring with her terrified cries.

As if revealed by a lightning flash Rhodie caught a glimpse of a human form of shadow gray hue; but in the one glance the bright eyes of the phantom seemed to pierce the youthful gazer's soul, and the rush of its passage sounded like a breathing of his name.

"It is a haunted farm!" said Rhodie.

CHAPTER VII.

THE FLIGHT.

When the housekeeper, Catherine, fled from the room in afright, and Rhodie saw the gray figure flit past the window, he stood rooted to the spot. He was startled enough to follow his late companion, but the glitter of the apparition's glance seemed to have cast a spell upon him. Not long was he given for recovery, for with a louder "swish" than before the mysterious figure swept by the casement again, and ere yet the palpitations of his heart had beaten ten seconds, with a rush like storm-wind, the gray specter burst through the window, and swinging into the room stood before him.

"Ha, Rhodie," it cried, in a ghostly whisper, "how's this for spook bizness. Come, quick, lay hold o' the rope like grim death. Don't touch me or you'll git all over ashes. Ready. That Irishwoman's raisin' partic'lar Cain down thar. Thar they come, by jingo, like a flock o' geese. Sich a gettin' up stairs. Hold tight, Rhodie. Hist. Ready! Ghosts darsen't holler houpla! Off we go."

Rhodie had mounted on the sill beside him, and he, twining one of his legs in the rope he held, passed an arm around his companion's slight waist, and giving a signal to some one outside, jumped from the casement and swung with a great sweep far beyond the shadow of the great elm. Over one limb of this tree, very high up, the rope was passed, and it was so well served by the unseen confederates of Bare-Back Bill that it payed out over the limb as they swung and landed them gently on the ground in the shadow far from the house.

"Now, fellers, get the end of the line over your shoulders and leg it. There they're at the window. Come, Rhodie," cried Bill, catching his rescued companion by the hand and starting like a nimble ghost as he was through the orchard down toward the canal.

His associates took the end of the friendly tow-line and ran noiselessly away into the darkness.

A canal boat was found lying close in to the heel-path at the foot of the orchard when they arrived there, and having all got aboard the craft was rapidly poled across, and the ready horses attached, and away they glided out of hearing before the judge and his servants had got their lanterns lighted.

In answer to Rhodie's questions, Bill said he started along the canal after his escape, in hopes of meeting "some fellers" to help him in the rescue, when he met his old cap's boat, and readily procured the required assistance together with the banjo to use for the finding out of the prisoner's whereabouts.

Bare-Back Bill was a creature of restlessness and impulse. He could not be quiet; excitement was essential to his well-being—necessary, indeed, to his being at all. The excitement of his victory was past and the dullness of being merely a passenger on a canal boat palled upon his unquiet spirit. The victory aforesaid had filled him with triumphant pride, and as his was a demonstrative nature, he determined to celebrate his success by a jubilee.

"Rhodie," he said, as they neared the locks and saw the flaring lights of the grogeries, and heard the rasp and twiddle of fiddle and banjo, and caught glimpses of bobbing figures, and were excited by the rumpety-thump of many pairs of canal boats, and the laughter of spectators, "Rhodie, let's have a grand jollification on the head of our escape. There's somethin' wrong up at the locks, else this wouldn't go on so lively. Phew! what a crowd o' boats! A dead block good for the night. Let's give 'em an entertainment somethin' like. Let's show 'em how to do it, eh, cully? Let's make stampees while the lamps shine."

"I'm willing," said Rhodie. "We'll make money enough to take the cars for New York. I'm afraid of these telegrams. But, Bill, if the policemen should be after us with descriptions and know us——"

"I think you'd best lie snug, youngsters, if you don't want to get back to Lockport or Buffalo," said the owner of the boat, who had served them so well in their escape from Cornell House.

"Oh, pshaw, cap, they can't be a lightnin' jerkin' all night, and you can't catch a cop out o' nights like this, 'cept there's money to be scraped. Git the banjo, Rhodie."

"Well, mind now, I can't help you out o' any more shindies," said the captain, warningly.

"Better not, Bill!" said Rhodie, timidly.

"Wh-a-t?" cried Bare-Back Bill, with a contemptuous drawl. "and let them bummers spend all their stamps without havin' a whack. Not for Bare-Back Bill. No sir-ee. If you're afeard, I'll go and tumble for 'em, or make a tight-rope of a tow-line and do some high and lofty squirming at five cents a squirm."

He was bounding across the decks of the packed boats toward the scene of the merry-making when Rhodie followed and caught him, saying:

"I will go with you, Bill. I want to be along with you. If you're caught, I'll be caught too."

"Bully for you, Rhodie!" cried Bill. "Grand fandango would only be a one-mule affair 'thout you."

"If we could only disguise ourselves, Bill."

"Hooray for Rhodie!" cried the enthusiastic Bill, with a delighted caper. "Bang up idea! First grand rehearsal of the Bare-Back and Rhodie troupe. Stay where you are till I git some corks from Jake."

He dashed off to the grocery and returned in a minute with his two hands full of bottling corks, and catching up a lantern sought a shady spot upon the deck and commenced to burn them in the flames of the lamp.

"Here, Rhodie," he cried, "come and make yourself useful. Here's your real republican convertor. Change the darrest stranger to a man and a brother—while you'd say 'black-a-moor.' Hurry up, you, Shuffler," he called to the new driver. "We're goin' into the darky manufacturing. Come over and help us."

"What are you doing?" said the captain, as he saw the three squatted around the lantern, charring the corks.

"We're agoin' to join the ebony brigade—gwine to git black in the face for spite, so's folks won't see us blush on our first public appearance. Eh, Rhodie?—we'll show 'em disguise. You touch me up, and I'll daub you. Polish that nose nice. Leave some white 'round the eyes for a pair o' spectacles, though you and me's a pair o' spectacles anyhow—ain't we? There, Rhodie, by George, you're fit for a seat in Congress. You're a black trump, and I'm next—your left bower, as the fellers say. How am I for an irrepressible contraband? Shuffler, lend Rhodie that thing you call a coat, to hide his good clothes."

While this fusilade was rattling through the never-resting lips, the two youngsters, to the great amusement of the captain and his crew, by means of the burnt cork, converted each other into the semblance of two extra dark darkies, and laughed gayly at

each other as they arose and capered around the deck. Shuffler was also seized with an Ethiopian ambition and smeared his face into a ludicrous resemblance of a zebra's.

In this sable state they proceeded to the grocery, Rhodie playing a quickstep on the banjo, and all the drowsy tow-boys on the boats waking up to form in the procession. The revelers ceased their dancing and jabbering to see the cause of the racket. The capering, black-faced youngsters were hailed with joyful acclamations and space was made for them in the center of the bar-room. The white boys—none of them very white—were delighted at the prospect of fun; the former musicians, real out and out Ethiopians, were choking with envy. There was every appearance of Bare-Back and Rhodie's celebration of victory being a brilliant success, and their hearts were jubilant.

Rhodie played in the very best vein, and Bare-Back Bill, taking the floor by general request, proceeded to exemplify the pliability of bone and sinew in a most exhilarating and dislocating manner, and his supple endeavors so aroused the terpsichorean enthusiasm of the real Ethiopians that they forgot their musical envy and their offense at the burlesquing of their complexions, and jumped into the dancing space with leap and fling. Shuffler followed heroically and the crowd of by-standers cheered them on!

In the very height of the Babelonian merriment a wagon with side lamps dashed up to the grocery, nearly running down some of the excited dancers, and Armand Montcalm and his ally, the constable, alighted.

"We are in luck," said the first, joyously; "this stoppage is a god-send. They can't have passed."

"Point them out!" said the constable, pompously, buttoning up his lapel that his badge of authority might be seen, and taking from his tail pocket two pairs of hand-cuffs. "Show 'em to me, sir. I'll fix 'em."

In order to comply with this request Montcalm unshipped one of the lamps from the wagon, and the burly constable took the other. They endeavored to get toward the store door, but experienced a series of annoying collisions from the whirling revelers that greatly delayed their progress.

Montcalm cursed, and the constable called his authority to their aid.

"Hal you fellows," he cried, in a tone of proclamation, "I am a constable."

"Oh, my eye!" arose from the crowd in a derisive hoot that spoke little for the estimation in which the constituted authority was held in that quarter.

"I am sent with authority to arrest two runaway young criminals."

"Well, arrest 'em then, darn you!"

"I demand to know," interrupted Montcalm, "if any boys have passed this way since nightfall, answering the description—"

"Lots of 'em, you fool!"

"Or are they here now?"

"Take a squint around, you muffin!"

Montcalm and his ally both seemed to think this the most sensible course to pursue, and proceeded to inspect the blackened and tarred faces which were ludicrously distorted during the scrutiny.

"These are all niggers," cried the constable.

"All disguised," cried Montcalm. "What is the meaning of this masquerade?"

"Wanted to be light on ye," cried one of the masquers, "afraid you might be ashamed to mix 'mong white men."

Here Montcalm's professional ear caught the well-known sound of Rhodie's banjo proceeding from the store, and made frantically in that direction, followed by the constable and hustled by the crowd.

"They are here," he cried, excitedly.

"No. They are nayers, too," said the constable, who had reached the threshold first and stared in.

"That's the two," cried Montcalm, pushing in and confronting the young banjoist and dancer. "Take them, officer."

"Let him offer, sir!" cried Bare-Back Bill, springing forward as the constable pushed up to seize Rhodie with the handcuffs in his hand.

"Here you!" cried the officer, endeavoring to grab the boy.

"Paws off, you duffer!" cried Bill, hauling off and giving the official face a sounding slap with his corked hand, which left a broad black mark. "There's a trade-mark for you!" he said; and then turning to Rhodie, who had dropped the banjo in terror, he continued: "Don't be skeared, Rhodie, ole boy; there's fellers enough here to-night to eat all the constables from here to Buffalo. Ain't there, fellers?"

"Ay, ay, Bill! Heave him out here!" yelled the fandangoists outside.

"Wait," said Montcalm, in a deprecating tone, advancing with

an oratorical outstretching of the hands. "I come for this young person's good," pointing to Rhodie. "Won't you go back with me?"

"No," said Rhodie, decidedly.

"Nuff said. Git out and let the fun go on!" yelled the crowd.

"Wait—listen to me. This is no boy. It is a girl disguised."

"Get out, you beat. D'ye take us for flats?" cried the boys.

"She is the child of wealthy parents, and an heiress."

"Hustle him out!" And the boys began to hustle both officer and manager, encouraged by the laughter of the men.

The dignity of the constable could not stand this; the momentary hopes of Montcalm were in danger of demolition. They both resisted desperately and seized upon Rhodie. But they were glad to let him go again for tarry hands, cork hands, and painty hands buffeted them right and left.

"Tar and feather them," roared Bare-Back Bill. "Head and tail 'em with their own handcuffs, and send 'em back to the constituted authorities."

"Hi! hi! That's the ticket! Tar and feathers for 'em both!" roared the drivers, approvingly.

"You dassent!" cried the man of constituted authority, trying to free himself from the numerous hands.

"You crowd of audacious ragamuffins!" exclaimed Armand Montcalm, with the dignity of Curiolanus repelling the Roman mob.

"Hear him! hear him! He talks well!"

"He's a high old blower, ain't he?"

"Oh my, no. He's young and green. He knows not what he says."

"Wake up, fellers! This here is all talk and no tar—that's what's the matter. There's my mark to begin with."

At this one of the "audacious ragamuffins" accordingly struck the lordly face of Montcalm a sounding slap with his tarry paw, leaving the print of his hand where it struck. A combined roar followed the feat. A roar of rage from Montcalm, a roar of laughing applause from the boys, and encouraged by the success of his fellow driver another of the young desperadoes invaded the sacred features of constituted authority in the same insulting manner. This was far too much for human nature, and the official, totally forgetting or throwing aside all the prudence for which men of his profession are famous, rushed boldly on the enemy.

Such a time. Every hand now had a slap, and shrieks of laughter told the funniest of that deluded officer's struggles. Soon the "constituted" face was rendered perfectly unrecognizable by the constitutors thereof, and Armand Montcalm might have played Zuaga or Othello without the trouble of complexionizing.

"Here's a rail!" cried several voices, and as many boys bore up to the busy center of the crowd with a long split rail taken from a neighboring zig zag fence.

At sight of this barbarous means of conveyance both of the tortured men fumed, threatened, kicked, and pleaded, but the youngsters were inexorable, and prayers and threats availed not. Each victim in turn had his jaunt around the open space, as ridiculous and raging as could be, and further indignity, or even harm might have happened to them but for the kindness of Rhodie and the magnanimity of Bare-Back Bill.

"There, fellows," said Bill; "that's enough at one trip—they fellers have played circus long enough. Let up!"

"Let down, I guess you mean, Bill," said the stalwart young vagabond, who formed half the front legs of Armand's wooden horse. "Wo! ho! Jemima Jane."

He let his end of the rail fall so suddenly on the ground that the artistic Armand performed an involuntary somersault and alighted plump on his seat of dignity in the deep dust of the path. The constable was no less unhappy in his manner of dismounting from his "Arab" steed.

"We will see to this, you set of young scoundrels!" he gasped, struggling to his feet.

"Jest so!" said Bare-Back Bill, politely offering his assistance.

"Git yer specks so you can see better."

The angry constable gave up the scaling operation in despair, only shaking his fist in harmless rage at the laughing crowd as he scrambled into his wagon.

Armand Montcalm arose from the dust ruefully but royally, as became a tragic hero, and stalked in stately silence to the wagon.

"You youngster, Bill Mint, remember me!" he said, in a deep, melodramatic tone, as he put his foot on the hub. "I never forgive a wrong! For this night's work death shall be your portion."

Seizing the lines from the constable, he urged his nags away from the hateful spot at the top of their speed, which wasn't ex-

extraordinary. As he went, he hurled back anathemas at the crowd in the most approved theatrical style, and every volley was greeted by yells of derision, and wild peals of laughter from the boys.

"Well, if that thar feller isn't a cheeky cuss!" said Bill to Rhodie. "And to think of his sayin' that you was a gal, Rhodie; that's the worst I ever heard. Isn't it, fellers?"

"I guess 'tis," was the general answer.

But there was some dissenters to the indorsement, and several boys and men both bent their gaze upon the little figure in a manner that caused it to shrink.

"And the guy about you bein' an heir and goin' to git wealth and all that," continued Bill, sneeringly. "Guess that feller took us for softies, and was givin' us a dose of story book. That's the way they do it in the story books. Guess he won't like his dose o' tar any mightier than we did his dose of story book. Wasn't it lucky all the fellers were here? If it hadn't been for the lock being closed, they'd have snapped you off like a coach whip."

"Give us another turn—a dancel!" cried several.

Bare-Back Bill was willing. He was always willing to exercise his ability for the pleasure of his fellows. But Rhodie declined, at first quietly, but when urged till near the point of forcing, he unstrung the banjo, and decidedly refused to pick another tune.

"That's the talk, Rhodie," said Bill. "That's right; if you don't wish to, don't let any one force you. Boys, the performance is closed for the evening. Come, Rhodie, let us git along."

With these words he caught Rhodie by the arm, and started off in the gloom, and the calls from the boat for him to get aboard sounded after them unheeded save for Bill's remark.

"Tain't no use, cap'n and gentlemen, the feller you're pipin' to quarters has changed his purfession, and's goin' to fight it out on this line like a major. Eh, Rhodie?"

And Rhodie's hand trembled in that of his protector, as he answered:

"Yes, Bill."

CHAPTER VIII.

MOTHER MINT THREATENED.

The shabby house in Ohio street, Buffalo, was basking in the noon-day sun, and within it Mother Mint was dozing dreamily over her drawer of dross. The contents of her gin bottle were in a diminished condition, and so were her sensibilities. However, what little she had left were partly aroused by a repeated rap at the door, and with an inquiring grumble she wheeled her chair the few feet that intervened and shot back the bolts.

"You, Joe Tivers!" she snarled, as Armand Montcalm stood upon the threshold. "What brings you here disturbing me? Didn't I say to you that your room was welcomer than your company?"

The man noticed her maudlin humor, and answered her in soothing tones as he caught the back of her chair, and wheeled it toward its accustomed place at the table.

"I merely called to inquire for your health, aunty, perhaps to talk a little business with you——"

"You!" she growled. "What do you care about my health? Ha! The only care you could have would be my death! What business can you have with me but what serves yourself?"

"Oh, now, aunty, you are really too hard upon your devoted Armand—indeed you are! Let me show my unselfishness by wheeling you closer to the treasure-trove. You should never leave that unprotected, you know."

"And pray, you runagate scapegrace," she cried, "what have you to do with my treasure? I s'pose your idle fingers itch to clutch my little savings, but you never will feel or finger it—never! never!"

"Don't be alarmed," he said, with a smile, although an evil expression flitted across his face. "I have no desire to touch a dollar of your money except by your own good will——"

"My own good will!" she cried, sharply; "I have no good will toward you—I hate the sight of you! Leave the house! Go and vagabond it till you're sent for! Then you'll know, where you're welcome. I've told you that before."

"Peace, gentle aunt, keep silence, I implore you, and listen, that thy heart may be instructed," he said, in his pompous manner. "It goes against the soul of Armand Montcalm to be driven from the path of well doing and honorable impulse, especially——"

"You're a chitter-chattering ape!" cried the old woman, impatiently.

"Especially," repeated Armand, not heeding the interruption, "when he comes for your own good."

"For my good," said the woman, with a tone of intense mockery.

"Yes!" continued Armand, with quiet emphasis. "For your good and—mine. One minute, please. You have wealth——"

"Ha-a-a! I knew it."

"Never mind, then, but listen to me," he cried. "I'll be as plain as a prairie, 'as brief as the poesy of a ring,' or a guinea pigs tail. Would you like to double your money without risk? Would you like your golden eagles to hatch and your silver to augment?"

This touched home to the avaricious heart of the old woman and she wheeled partly around and fastened her sallow eyes upon him with an expression indicative of suspicion and inquiry blended.

"You must listen to me," he said. "You cannot help yourself. You must agree with me, or I will have you in a dungeon of the jail before a half-hour, where you'll have no gold to hug and mutter to."

"No—no—no!" muttered the wretched creature tremulously, as if this last threat of being separated from her treasure was more horrible to her than death or dungeon.

"Well, be a sensible catamount, then," said the man, "and listen to reason. Accident has forced my way into a partnership which you refused to my solicitations. I know that your 'small savings'——"

"Small—very small," she piped.

"Don't lie; I have an eye to calculate: I have an ear to hear," cried the amiable Armand. "Tell me, would you not rather give me half of this store——"

"Good mercy—half!" gasped the crone, in horror.

"Half," he repeated, quietly, "or lose the whole of it, and end your life in prison as an abductor and a conspirator to murder—if not be hanged for the latter crime itself."

The old woman's sallow visage became ashy pale, and her whole form trembled as she fell back in her chair and gazed at the speaker in affright.

"You are a devil," she said, almost inaudibly, "but I defy you!"

"Take care," he said, sternly; "'tis dangerous to defy the devil. Better make friends with him while you can, for you're sure to have a long sojourn in his quarters, and it can't be long till you commence it."

The old creature shuddered and then tried to laugh, but the attempt was a signal failure and she gave it up.

"Why—why do you come to torture a poor old woman for money, and you a young, strong man?" she croaked, complainingly.

"Now you're sensible," he answered, "and we shall get along. I come to the 'poor' old woman because the poor old woman is rich, and the strong young man is as poor as sour chowder. Strong young man has a stomach to be lined; strong young man has a back to be clad. Strong young man has a chance to make ten thousand dollars——"

"Ten thousand dollars!" exclaimed Mother Mint, forgetting her own tribulation in the ecstasy of astonishment caused by the mere mention of such a vast sum.

"Ten thousand dollars," repeated Armand, emphatically; "but, unfortunately, strong young man is not possessed at the present time of the ten thousandth part of a dollar, and is not able to follow up his hand. Therefore, cometh he to poor old woman—who shall share the profits."

The old woman looked steadily at him with eyes that glittered like those of an aged snake.

"But how—how can you make all that money? How can I believe you?"

"Believe me for mine honor," cried Armand, in his spouting manner. "And yet, as I have your secret, I will give you an inkling of mine. You have an heir, and I have an heiress. A certain person is ready to come down handsomely to you for the quiet removal of yours, and a certain other person is ready to pay handsomely for the recovery of mine."

"An heir—an heiress!" muttered Mother Mint, in a bewildered manner.

"Just so. A rather singular coincidence. Dramatic in the extreme. Should properly, according to poetical justice and dramatic propriety, conclude with a marriage between heir and heiress, and probably will, as they travel together like Siamese twins."

"Who—who—who?" cried the woman, with a nervous eagerness. "Who travel together? What heir—what heiress?"

"Why, your one, Bare-Back Bill, the canal boys call him—an elegant name for a young gentleman of fortune—and my one, my runaway juvenile, Gerty."

"Gerty—Gerty. That's short for Gertrude," said Mother Mint.

"Right, Mother Mint."

"And—and how is she an heiress? You never said so before."
 "Never knew it 'till I pursued her up the State."
 "Up the State—up the State," muttered the old woman.
 "Who does she belong to?"
 "A certain learned judge, as rich as learned—one Cornell."

"Judge Cornell!" exclaimed Mother Mint, with a cry like a cat-bird. "And you've been there, too!"

"I've been there; it's my business to go everywhere. But what of that? Do you know those wealthy folks?"

The woman glared at him abstractedly.

"Yes—no—yes!" she stammered, and her eyes fell before the penetrating gaze of the interrogator.

"That is certainly a well-balanced answer," he said, quietly; "but couldn't you make it a little more decided either one way or the other?"

"The Cornell people are an old and well-known family," said the old woman, hesitatingly; "and—and your cousin, my daughter Catherine, lived at service there. Furies seize you! What do you raise the memories for? I have drunk gin for years so I could forget them, and *you* must come here sneaking and listening and questioning to set me mad again. Go! go! I hate the sight of you worse now than ever!"

She half rose from her chair, waving her feeble hands wildly toward him, and glaring like some wild beast; but the paroxysm of passion was too much for her shattered strength, and she fell back grasping the bottle and putting it to her head.

"Quite dramatic, I declare," cried the dutiful and pitying nephew, ecstatically. "If you were firm enough upon your pins, I'd engage you immediately for Meg Merilles. Just the thing. 'Make up all perfect' and accomplished by the hand of nature, wardrobe the perfect excellence of tatter——"

His theatrical speculations were interrupted by the half-frenzied mutterings of Mother Mint, who spoke as if totally unaware of his presence. With all the eavesdropping instincts of his nature aroused, he leaned over the back of her chair to listen.

"They two together—strange—strange—strange," she muttered. "The hand of Heaven is in it, else how did they come together. Was it you that brought it about?" she cried, with a sudden, angry screech, as she wheeled around to face the inquisitive Armand.

"No," he answered. "They met by chance, 'twas in a crowd, curse them!"

"How do you know that she belongs to the Cornells?"

"From ocular demonstration and paternal assurance."

"Speak English," snapped the woman.

"Well, by chance in my pursuit of the youngster, I fell across Cornell House, and found that my runaway had been caught trespassing on the ground and recognized by the parents as their abducted child."

"They acknowledged her, then?"

"They were frantic with joy over the recovery before I got there, and crazy with grief afterward, for she had been rescued from the mansion by this Bare-Backed ruffian you are guardian to. That's the statement in an egg-shell. The judge offers me ten thousand for her recovery. I have no stamps to follow up the chase, so pony out, I've no time to spare. What difference does it make if you give me now a part of what I must get altogether when you go where the good Ethiopians retire after life's fitful fever? I am your only relative."

Mother Mint turned and laughed fiercely in his face, and threw her scraggy body forward on the table that contained the disputed treasure, and laughed again.

"You'll get it, will you? You are waiting for my death? Wait—wait—wait. I may die, but my money you will never finger!"

"Will I not?" cried the nephew, with a savage scowl. "You driveling idiot, the gin has dulled your wits. Do you not see that money is to be made of this? Can you not understand that these runaways are traveling together——"

"Billy will not run away from me," chuckled the woman. "He will come back here and bring her with him. He loves old Mother Mint for herself, not for her money, but for herself——"

"By my faith, he has a stomach."

"My wolfish nephew has a stomach, too, and wants to threaten me out of my gold. But I'm not to be frightened. I can knock with my crutch; I can call, and the neighbors will hear me."

"Will they?" said Armand, in a hissing whisper, and his hand fumbled stealthily in his breast, while the blackness of his visage portended little good to the frail being who defied him. "Do you understand," he said, venomously, "that you are in my power from other cause than personal violence? Are you so besotted as not to know that our interests in this matter are equal? You are offered money, and have accepted a portion of it to get rid of Bare-Back Bill. I am promised heavy pay for the recovery of little Gertrude. Give me the means to accomplish

my recovery, and as an equivalent I will accomplish your riddance."

This was said with a significant snarl and hiss of a stage villain, and whether simulated or not, had its effect upon the listener, who stared at this change in the usually rollicking nephew in a surprised manner, that showed how new this development of his character was to her.

"And—and—" she said, in her stammering way, "if I gave you the money to find the girl—you would kill the boy?"

Armand looked at her with a ghastly smile, and said, in slow, quiet tones:

"The boy should trouble me nor you no more."

"Joe Tivers," said the woman, pointing her skinny finger at the young man, "I always knew you were a scamp and vagabond; I never thought you were a *murderer*!"

"And what are you?" cried the man, with a fierce start

"Joe Tivers," she hissed through her clenched teeth, "if I have done wrong I had cause. If I have grasped for money it was because I was crippled and helpless without it. It has become a disease with me, as drink has—as drink has. But you have no cause of anger against this boy——"

"Have I not?" cried the nephew, angrily. "He has disgraced me, abused me, and cheated me of the money in my grasp for this runaway girl's recovery. Without thought of your interest I have hate enough to kill him."

"You shall not—he is your own cousin."

"My cousin," roared the man, with a fierce laugh; "my cousin—and an heir?"

"And an heir," said Mother Mint, with a laugh as mocking as his own. "He is the child of Judge Cornell's nephew and my daughter Catherine—he is the heir of Mother Mint. Ha-a-ah! Now, are you first of kin? Now, will you grab my gold when I am dead?"

The nephew gave a great start and an angry exclamation. His countenance grew gloomy black and his compressed lips were colorless as he said, aside:

"I will be and I will!"

CHAPTER IX.

THE GIPSY CAMP.

Bare-Back Bill and little Rhodie ran away from the noise of the canal across the fields as fast as the darkness would permit them.

Arriving at a field where numerous cocks of new-mown hay were visible the fugitives quickly clambered over the fence, and at the suggestion of Bare-Back Bill, who had often before used the same expedient to obtain a night's lodging, they burrowed into the centers of two adjacent haystacks, and being safe from capture slept until morning.

If they had known the anxieties and plots and machinations that were progressing in various parts on their account, for and against, it is likely their dreams would have been even more restless than their suffocatingly-warm beds made them.

"Rhodie, Rhodie, are you awake?" cried Bill, as he crawled out of his strange couch in the haystack into the sunny morning, and pushed with his foot against the next rick. "Crawl out here, old fellow, it's time we were on our legs again."

There was neither answer by voice or crawling out, and with great anxiety lest his young friend might have been smothered in his close quarters, Bill caught hold of the hay near the bottom and heaved the pile over, only to discover the empty nest where Rhodie had lain.

"Gone," he cried, looking around desperately.

"And come again," cried a laughing voice, and Bill saw the missing Rhodie appear from behind the hay-pile from which he himself had lately crawled, but he saw something more unexpected and less welcome, in the shape of a man and two dogs, coming across the field toward them.

"Ha! you young thieves, I've caught you, have I?" roared the man, floundering over the stubble.

"Answer your own questions," bellowed Bill back at him, for he had taken in the situation at a glance, and his plans were formed with his usual quickness.

The man was fat, and stout and slow of foot, so was the larger of the dogs (a very big one); the other animal was comparatively small and swift, and would reach them in advance of the others. Bill caught Rhodie and hoisted him up the side of one the haystacks.

"Sit there," he cried, "while this fellow and me has a game o' follow my leader. Don't be afraid; I'll fix him."

The smaller dog came dashing on, and when at a short distance, Bill ran out of sight behind the hay-rick, leaving Rhodie seated on top of it in full view of the approaching animal.

"Now, old boy, Rhodie," cried Bill, "hold on like grim death, and I'll show you a daylight view of the dog star."

The brute sprang forward with a furious bark, and seeing only Rhodie on the hay-pile, made a bound direct for him; but not quite reaching his intended victim, began to scramble up the yielding hay. In that instant the Philistine was upon him in the shape of Bare-Back Bill, who seized the unsuspecting canine by the tail, and with a circling sweep, hurled him aloft as the Scotchman flings the heavy hammer.

"There's some high and lofty tumbling for you," roared Bill, as the astonished dog went sprawling through the air, and falling into a neighboring field, lay there meditating likely on life's vicissitudes.

"Here comes the big one, Bill!" exclaimed the frightened but admiring Rhodie, from his perch.

Bill faced the enemy. There was only one in motion, and that was the massive mastiff. The gouty farmer, petrified with amazement at the aerial flight of his canine advance guard, stood as stiff and still as Lot's wife, but on—on went his heavy reserve, nearer and nearer to the boys.

As the puffing quadruped drew close, Bill tried the same tactics and ran behind the rick, but that heavy-timbered canine, either sensible of his own fatty unfitness for climbing, or appreciating the ridiculous figure his fellow had cut through the atmosphere, declined the steep ascent and galloped solidly around the stack after Bill.

Now, Bare-Back Bill was waiting impatiently for the plunge of the brute on the side of the hay-pile, and calculating his chances of being able to sling such a mass of dog-flesh, little imagining that the enemy was coming a flank movement on him until the dog's snout was within a few inches of the most vulnerable portion of his person.

"Look out, Bill, he's after you!" roared Rhodie from his point of observation, and but for the timely warning he would have been Bare-Back Bill in truth as well as title.

Around the stack went Bill, and around the stack after him went the four-legged pursuer, made sprightly by the near view of his prey, until the affair became monotonous, and the dog's fatness began to tell against him, and the farmer was approaching.

"Oh, look a-here!" cried Bill, "this here'll never do; I must get out of it somehow."

With that he made a spurt and found himself close on the rear of the enemy. The appreciation of the chance was instantaneous, so was the seizure of it. With a bound he alighted straddle legs on the broad back of the mastiff, and caught him by the fat neck, on either side, to hinder him from turning to bite. With a howl the dog tried to back from under him and then darted forward in the endeavor to run away from him, but both efforts were vain.

"Down with you, Rhodie, and mount behind," cried Bill, with a laugh, but the sensible animal he bestrode didn't wait for double riding, but darted off with his rider at a speed that surpassed any time he had made for many a year.

"Slide down and scoot it, Rhodie!" cried Bill, and Rhodie did so, dashing off in the wake of his rollicking companion and leaving the fat farmer standing in amaze at the singular manner of his defeat.

"Hi, yi! Rhodie, old boy! How's this for Mazeppa? Special courier with government dispatches! Three weeks in a circus. Hooray!" cried Bill, triumphantly.

But pride ever goes before a fall, and crossing a hidden furrow down fell the panting animal and heels overhead went the rider among the stubble. Rhodie thrummed a retreat upon the banjo, and the miserable mastiff showed his non-appreciation of music by increasing his pace as if there were a dozen tin pans at his tail.

They had not a long time for laughter or congratulation for a reinforcement of farm hands appeared in the distance, and the youngsters thought it wise to scoot away. Having start, they were soon beyond pursuit, and at length had the happiness (if happiness it was) to arrive among the shrubbery at the boundary fence of a graveyard.

A jabbering of many voices was distinctly heard, and by parting the weeds and shrubbery they saw a gipsy camp in all its rugged picturesqueness. The sight pleased Bill's rollicky nature so much that he said to Rhodie in a pleased, half audible tone:

"By jimminy! it is the gipsies."

"Yes, it is the gipsies."

"Right, my chickens! it is the gipsies," said a rough, laughing voice behind them. "Take a nearer look at them."

Both Bill and Rhodie started at this unexpected salute, but before they could act or speak each was seized by a couple of strong men and heaved over the picket fence so that they lit upon their feet, and, with varied cries, the members of the camp gathered around them.

But one woman, who bore an indescribable difference from the rest, and sat moping beneath a tree, looked up at the sound, and

catching a glimpse of the two boys, jumped from her seat on the ground and rushed toward them.

"Gerty, my child!" she cried, frantically casting aside those who stood in her path, and about to grasp Rhodie.

"No you don't, crazy one!" cried Bill, springing instinctively to his comrade's assistance.

The woman stopped suddenly, stared from one to the other of the youngsters, and leaned against a tree, gasping:

"You two together—YOU TWO!"

"What does she mean by that, Rhodie?"

"It's Wild Kate," whispered Rhodie.

"I know. But what is she talkin' about? What makes her look so? Why does she call you her child?"

"I don't know. She always did so; but she's crazy, and she seems to know you as well as she does me."

"Go 'way! How'd she know me? I never was a gipsy," answered Bill; and the woman muttered, with the vacant iteration of madness:

"YOU TWO TOGETHER!"

CHAPTER X.

MONTCALM ON THE TRACK.

Armand Montcalm left the home of Mother Mint, and as he strode along the street by the edge of the canal with his head bent in meditation of his plans he was hailed by an impudent youngster on one of the boats with the words:

"Say, mister, how's tar down at Marston?"

Montcalm started erect, intelligence beamed in his eye—a bright idea had struck his brilliant mind and produced a spark of light.

"This is one of the ragamuffins that assailed me," he said. "I should wring his neck or have him arrested, but I am forced to make friends with him."

He crossed and called the boy, who, unknowing of the man's intentions, at first ran away, but was coaxed back by promises of reward for the privilege of interviewing him. The young artist was scalloping miniature half-moons in the edge of a mammoth half-moon of an unhealthy-looking watermelon, and Armand, like a sensible man who "had been there himself," ordered the lad to throw away the cholera-producer and take dinner with him.

Although at first incredulous of his good fortune, the boy followed Armand, and under the influence of a good appetite, which was being well supplied, he poured forth all he knew about Bill and Rhodie, and Montcalm's heart and hopes beat high as he listened. This gluttonous little informer told the gentleman that the youngsters he sought had left the boats at Marston Locks, where the canal boy had the honor of giving the gentleman the tar-and-rail entertainment.

"But," said Montcalm, wincing at the allusion, "you said you saw them since. Now, a dollar beside your dinner if you tell me where."

"Give's the dollar," said the boy, with extended palm, and the man put the money in it.

"Now, where did you see them?"

"Near Black Rock, with a gang of gipsies," answered the boy promptly.

"Gipsies!" exclaimed Armand, joyously rubbing his hands, but a cloud suddenly succeeded the joy. "That'll need money, too. I must get it—but where?"

With these words he paid for the boy's dinner, and turned away in a worse mood than before this last beam of light had illumined his darkness. His steps were back toward Mother Mint's abode, and he muttered as he went:

"It will all be mine in the long run, and why not some of it now? Why should I be baffled by the wilfulness of an old hag like her?"

Muttering in this manner to himself he retraced his steps of a short time before. His manner was somewhat abstracted, none of the easy, rollicking, self-confidence of by-gone times, but a sort of gloomy doggedness. His steps were firm and even. On passing a window into which the sun shone, his eye was caught by the gleam of steel, and he turned involuntarily toward it.

It was a Jewish clothing shop, and among the goods at the bottom of the window were displayed several tawdry-looking bowie-knives and daggers, such as were formerly used by the cunning Israelite as gift inducements to the purchaser of suits. Montcalm stared at them vacantly, went on a piece, returned, stared again, and on being pressed to enter and look at the goods, complied, and after a short time left with one of the murderous bowies in his bosom.

As he approached his aunt's house his steps became quicker, nervously quick, and his strained eyes cast furtive glances left and right. His breath was labored, and his heart beat with thumps audible to himself. His impulse was to pass the door

and glance into the window, but a stronger impulse turned him into the little hall, and he paused with his nervous hand suspended over the knob of the door leading to the old woman's room. In that pause he imagined he heard the sound of voices, and a chill of fear ran up and down his frame, but the next instant he recognized the piping, crackling voice of the crone herself, and he said:

"She's in one of her drunken fits talking to herself," and he drew a long breath as he laid his hand on the knob.

He had never felt such trepidation in approaching this wretched relative before, and becoming ashamed of it he nerved himself, opened the door, and stepped across the threshold. But he recoiled again quickly. His aunt was not alone, as he supposed, nor was she drunk—but unusually bright and sober. Two lawyer-like little men in black, one on each side of Mother Mint, leaning over the treasure table, which was strewn with papers. One of the strangers was actually guiding the hand of the maudlin Mother Mint in the signature of a document. She was so intent upon her unusual task that she did not see her nephew. Only one of the two little lawyers caught sight of him as he hurried out.

"Too late! too late! And that's the will!" he cried, hoarsely, as he rushed from the house and hurried along the street. "Yet," he said, with a sudden start, "of what value is a will without a legatee? If I destroy the will, a copy might remain—destroy the boy, both boy and will are dead! Good thought, Armand!—good thought! Take heart and hope; you've cash enough for the accomplishment of that. And now for Black Rock!"

CHAPTER XI.

THE ESCAPE.

"So this is our runaway, Gerty, is it?" said a tawny, heavy-whiskered villain, approaching the young prisoners. "But who is this?" indicating Bill.

"I'm Bare-Back-Bill."

"Bare-Back-Bill?" cried the gipsy with a start, and diving his hand into the deep breast-pocket of his velvet coat he fished up a greasy big pocket-book and took a folded paper therefrom.

During his examination of this, Gerty whispered over Bill's shoulders:

"We can't get away now. Please him for the present. Wild Kate is our friend. Look at her."

Bill looked and saw that the woman was signalling to them with an intelligence of face and gesture that spoke little of madness, and his determination was taken to yield to her pantomimic appealing and await the turn of events. His had been a hard enough life, but his good luck had never failed him in a tight place. Hardly had this determination been formed when the gipsy captain folded up his paper and approached him with as winning a look as his dark face could assume, and extended his hand.

"Michael Roma is glad to see you here," he said; "he has heard of you—has expected you—in truth he would have sought you had you not come."

"Very kind of Mike—I'll-roam-oh, indeed," said Bill, taking the proffered hand from policy, not taste. "But where does he hold forth? Who is he?"

"I am he," said the gipsy, grandly.

"No one would ever take you for a she, that's certain, captain," said Bill, with bold facetiousness, and the leader and his gang seemed to enjoy the joke.

"You'll be one of us," said Michael Roma, patronizingly. "You are sharp witted, quick of tongue, smart in action, and bold of spirit—you—"

"Thank you, cap. I could almost like you for that."

"Oh, don't fear, you'll be long enough with us to learn to like us."

"That'll take a darned long while, cap. More times than I can stretch my visit," said Bill, boldly, for he found that his free speech, instead of offending the dusky rovers amused them, and disposed them favorably toward him.

There was a peculiar significance, though, in the laugh with which Michael Roma greeted the boy's sally this time.

"Oh," he said, "we couldn't think of parting with such good company. You're just the stuff to make a good gipsy—"

"If you smoked me."

"Oh, we'll manage that, never fear," said the captain, with a sinister smile. "Your own mother wouldn't know you. Come to grab."

He led the way to a fire, where a large pot was sending forth a savory steam under the superintendence of a gipsy woman called Myrta. Bill and Gerty followed hand in hand, both of them filled with strange thoughts.

"Say, cap, suppose a fellow don't want to be smoked?" said Bill, as they went along.

"Oh, not one of them ever makes any objection," answered Roma, with a peculiar chuckle, "and there's plenty have been gipsyized like that. Why, yonker, do you imagine all here are gipsy born? Do you think that he or she wears a natural complexion? No, they were any of them whiter than you when we got them, and now their mothers wouldn't know them. They can't leave us if they wished—which they do not—for the world would hound them down as gipsies."

"Well, I must say, cap, you've got things down fine."

"You'll look just like one of them!"

"Not by a mile of tow-line, if I know myself!" cried Bill, with a war-like shake of the head.

"Yes, you will," said Roma, in a quiet, positive way.

"Well, I'll be darned but I like your cheek."

"You'll like your own when you see them touched up to match mine," said Roma, and he and his pals laughed heartily at the answer, for it was the first time he had got a catch on Bill.

"And what do you speculate on doin' with your humble servant after you've babooned him to match yourself?"

"We will teach you the customs of Bohemia. We will take you to Europe and show you the wonders of the old empires of the earth, and instruct you how to revel in the freedom and beauty of nature."

"Well, cap, can't deny but your programme's a gay one, and I'd like mighty well to trot it through if I'd time to spare, and the money was agreeable."

"Oh, you'll find time, yonker."

"Not much, cully. I'm engaged for all summer. But say, cap, doesn't it strike you as rather out o' the way to talk of a feller revelin' in freedom when he's a prisoner—and enjoyin' beauty when you say you're goin' to make him as ugly as the devil?"

Roma laughed, and left them to their meal while he went aside to hold a whispered consultation with some of his wanderers, and Bill, keeping his eye upon him, saw that the conversation between the knot of gipsies was congratulatory and joyous in the extreme, and that their glances were often turned toward him and his companion.

Wild Kate approached them where they sat, but retired at a wave of the hand and an angry growl from Roma. However, Bill saw her flitting about as near as possible among the trees, and making strange signals, which he could not understand. They were wildly grotesque enough to be caused by lunacy, so he ceased to notice them. His mind was more upon the mystery that surrounded his companion. He scarcely gave a thought to his present fortunes or the possibilities of the future.

"So you are a girl, Rhodie, after all," he said, as they proceeded to discuss the contents of a wooden dish full of stolen fowl, set before them by Myrta.

"Call me Gerty," was the reply of the girl, as she hung her blushing head. "But do not be angry with me for deceiving you."

"Oh, I ain't angry," said Bill, in a hurt tone, that seemed striving to be magnanimous. "I have no right to be angry, of course not, but then it is such a blessed guy on a feller. If I ever get out of this scrape the boys'll run me to death—they'll never let up on me in the world. It was a solid sell. Rhodie—Gerty, I mean—no—I mean that I'd better be polite for once in my life, and beg pardon—and call you nothin'."

"Why, what do you mean?" exclaimed Gerty, in juvenile afright.

"I mean that if you want to go and be a gal I can't travel with you, and I know by the grinnin' of these fellows over their prize that you're an heiress, and as that feller, Mike the Roamer, said what in thunder does a tatterdemalion like Bare-Back Bill want with an heiress, I'd like to know?"

"Why, Bill, Bill—"

"As I told you before, Rho—Ger—Miss—what's your name?"

"Oh, Bill!"

"As I said before, I'll travel alone. I'll join the 'gips,' and let them make a black and tan o' me, and I'll go to Europe and— and revel in the—the beauties and all the rest of it."

"Oh, Bill!" cried Gerty, dropping the wooden fork with which she had been pretending to eat, and covering her face with her little hands, the tears trickled through her fingers to the augmentation of the contents of the dish.

At sight of this Bill's conscience smote him, and he caught hold of her fingers to pull them away. He was a very rude comforter, however much his heart might be in it, and Gerty might have found many a more delicate juvenile Romeo or Melnotte than he, but not likely one so earnest—he was a youthful Ingomar, whose very savagery had a touch of gentle fervor in it.

"Rhodie—Gerty—I'll call you any name you like. Don't cry,

and I'll smash the meat-dish over Mike Roamer's head. I didn't mean to hurt your feelin's, s'help me—I'm a bob-tail cur if I did. I take it all back; you ain't a female heiress—you're the bully boy, Rhodie, you always was. I won't join the 'gips,' they sha'n't black and tan me, and I'll go to Hellgate before I go to Europe. There! We'll travel together as we used to do—wanderin' refugees—reg'lar babes in the wood. Laugh, Rhodie, laugh. I don't care a jackstone for the fellers' jibin'."

What female heart could resist such a running string of protestation and promise? Not Gerty's; but, female-like, she did yield too easily, but allowed her hand to be removed, finger by finger, from the flushed face, and then with an equal feminine impulsiveness, she threw her arms around Bill's neck and kissed his sunburnt cheek. It was the worst scrape and the most trying to Bill's courage that he had ever been in, and his confusion was heightened by the laughter of the gipsies at his shame-faced struggles to free himself.

"Hang on to him, Gerty!" they cried; "hang on to him!"

"Oh, go hang yourselves on to trees, you set o' gapin' gorillas!" cried Bill, angrily, for he was very sensitive of ridicule, as is usual with people who are fond of using that weapon themselves.

"What's the matter, Bill?" asked Roma, coming forward.

"Oh, go and serve your bill on some one who owes you something!" cried the discomfited youth, spitefully, for he felt like fighting the whole band; "and mind, old feller, you ain't agoin' to tan or sell any one here unless you want to get tanned or terribly sold yourself. Keep your eye open, Mr. Mike, or you'll remember 'the days when we went gipsying' along time to come."

"Come, come, yonker," said Roma, good-naturedly; "quit your scolding, it doesn't suit you. You've started Gerty cryin', and when she was with us before she was always as gay as a lark. Wake up, Gerty, and let us have one of the old time merry-makings. Your friend, they say, is smart enough to take a foot in. Here's your banjo one of the boys has found. Netcher, get your fiddle. That's right, lads and lasses, troop along," he cried joyously, as the young people, male and female, tripped laughingly from all directions toward the center, where the prisoners sat. "Now, Bare-Back Bill, what do you think of gipsy life?"

In looking over the picturesque, dusky crowd with pleased wonderment, Bill caught sight of Wild Kate on a knoll in the background, with her hand raised to attract attention. As soon as she saw she was noticed she held up a placard with

"\$10,000 REWARD"

in large characters at the head, and his own name and Rhodie's prominent beneath. This was all he could read at this distance and in so short a glance, but it hinted to him the secret of their detention by the gipsies.

It was a jollification boisterous and whole-souled, and Bare-Back Bill's objections to gipsy life weakened, and he thought if Rhodie—that is, Gerty—were along he could stand it very well. But the other side of the picture was seen when, at a shout from the captain, the merriment ceased, the music died with a strangling squeak, and the merry-makers rushed hither and thither in painful anxiety, collecting pots, pans, and tubs, with other unromantic chattels. Swiftly these were piled upon the wagons, the children were thrown in like bundles of rags, the dogs were chained to the axle-trees, and the word of march being given, the motley procession started from the pleasant greenwood to the dusty road, and trudged wearily away.

Bill and Gerty being state prisoners, which it behooved the captain to keep from the public gaze, were spared the dismal tramp and given seats on bedding in one of the covered wagons. Some children and a couple of women with infants occupied it with them, sitting, by orders, between them and at either end, while men walked before them and behind.

Bill was already planning an escape, but saw very little chance, and it was many days before he did. By night they camped in commons by the roadside, by day they jogged along monotonously, the women strolling away from the party in either direction to sell small pieces of their own handiwork, or tell fortunes, or steal, as the chance might offer. The men buying, selling or swapping horses.

At length the tall spires, and big brick houses, and smoky atmosphere of a city came in view, and Bill informed Rhodie it was Black Rock. Gerty found hope in this, for she said that lots of people from the cities, near which the gipsies were, always came to the camp out of curiosity, and they might be able to whisper to some of them or to cry out an alarm that they were prisoners in the hands of the gipsies. Bill thought her idea a good one, if the "gips" didn't gag them and hide them in the wagons or tents. This made Gerty tremble.

"I only wish I could get within hollerin' reach of the canal,

Gerty. Lord, wouldn't the 'gips' hop and scoot it if the boys came? But it's no use; they're goin' to anchor here on this side. Keep up heart, Gerty, I've watched the horses and chose the one I mean to carry you off on."

As the band were encamping, Roma approached the wagon where the prisoners were.

"Now, yonkers," he said, in his not unpleasant way, "I like you both, and wish to treat you as kindly as possible. We'll have plenty of people from the city flocking around us here, and maybe you have both thought already how easy it would be to call out to them that you are held here against your wills."

Both the youngsters winced, for he had read their thoughts, and their looks now confirmed his suspicion. He smiled, and said:

"It's only natural," he said, "but business is business. Listen to me. You, Gerty, are safe, and have nothing to fear, but everything bright ahead—"

"And Bill?" said Gerty.

"I'll speak of him by and by," said Roma. "Now I am going to be plain with you. I am going to make money out of both of you."

"Well, cap, that is plain as a wedding-ring—isn't it, Gerty?"

"I am to be paid for restoring Gerty; I am paid for removing you."

"Why, you're a wholesale contractor, ain't you, cap? But who wants me removed with care, as if I was a batch o' furniture or a piano?"

"Gerty will be taken safely to her family."

"I won't go to him. I had enough of him."

"It's not to him; it's to kind parents—your own father and mother. They are very rich, and you will be a lady."

"I don't want to be," said the little lady, positively. "I wouldn't know my kind parents if I saw them. I never had any one kind to me but Kate and Bill. You won't let her come near me, and you are going to send him away from me. I won't be rich while he is poor; I won't go anywhere but where he goes. If my parents will take him too, I will go to them; if you take him, you must take me, too."

"The same stubborn little mule of a Gerty," said Roma, with a laugh.

"Don't mind me, Gerty," said Bill, looking proudly at the girl. "Go to your folks an' be a rich lady—I'd like to know you were. Let me alone to find my way out of this scrape. If these fellows are able to hold me a week, I'll eat my shirt."

"Then you'll be Bare-Back Bill in earnest," said Roma. "But to business. If you will promise faithfully not to give an alarm nor attempt to hint to any one that you are here against your will, I will not gag you; if you don't, I must."

"I say as Bill says."

"The women will take care of you—I speak to Bill."

"Well, cap, I won't make no promises, and then you won't say behind my back that I went back on my word, for I'm goin' to git the first chance, and don't deny it. So gag away; I ain't much of a jawer, anyhow."

Roma walked away, smiling at Bill's mild estimate of his eloquence, and in a few minutes two ill-looking fellows, and as ill-tempered as they looked, came and led the boy forcibly away to one of the newly-erected tents in an obscure corner of the camp. Gerty tried desperately to accompany him, but was led away to the women's quarter.

"We don't care if you went loose, Gerty," said Roma, as the crying girl was taken past him, "for we have as good a right to catch a runaway for whose return a reward is offered as anybody else, but you might split on us about Bill, and we've a bad enough name without that."

While being put into the tent, Bill cast a quick look around to calculate his chances of escape. He possessed the faculty of photographing a scene upon his memory with all its minutia, and thus he did the one before him.

"Tent near the edge of brush-bottomed wood—good! Fallen tree, of large girth and ancient aspect, half overgrown with weeds and brush, butt of it near the tent, and top running out of sight in woods. Good again!"

It remains to be seen whether this circumstance was good, bad, or indifferent.

The tent was evidently placed there for the very same reason that made it a favorable one for a prisoner bent upon escape; it was an out-of-the-way place where prying visitors were little likely to lift the blankets and peep in. The center of the camp was the trading mart, and, therefore, the part where visitors most did congregate, and no tent or wagon there was safe from prying intrusion.

These gipsy tents, when they use any, are not very high arrangements, being used only for sleeping in and as a shelter from the weather. So when Bill's two jailers had tied his hands and fastened a heavy scarf around his mouth, they shoved him in

endways, as an undertaker puts a corpse in a hearse or a cookovens a trussed turkey, and so he lay through hours of racket and hubbub in utter perplexity as to how he was going to get out of this scrape. That the visitors had come and drink was flowing he knew by the drunken songs and yells, and he began to wonder how their teetotal intoxication (good idea) could possibly benefit him.

He could distinctly hear his guard tramping to an fro, now near, now far. They dare not keep too steady a watch for fear of attracting attention. One inquisitive visitor did ask what was in that tent they guarded, and they answered a small-pox patient, and the possessor of the inquiring mind retired in haste, perfectly satisfied.

Music and dancing sounded, and he knew that night had fallen, and with the thought of the shielding darkness his desire for liberty awoke. His hands were tied at the wrists in front, and he raised them above his head and tried to reach the knot of the gag at his back. It was a difficult task, as he could only use one hand at a time. As he was working at this he heard a slight sound like the "screed" of tearing cloth, and he lay still with his hands beneath his head, but not still long, for a cold chill ran over his body, and he gave a frightened start and would have cried aloud but for the gag.

"Don't be afraid, Bill, it's me, Gerty."

Chill and fright departed, and the glad blood bounded through his veins, and the friendly gag once more perhaps hindered him from betraying himself. Gerty was feeling for his hands, and he stretched them up toward her. In an instant the knife that had cut the canvas had severed his bonds, and tearing the scarf from his head, he cried:

"Bully for you, Rhodie! Where away now?"

"Follow me."

Bill followed and found himself inside the big tree trunk he had noticed before entering the tent.

"Well, I'll be pickled for an eel," he said, as they glided along like snakes, "if this isn't romance enough to beat canaling *hol-low*—a tree-mendous way to root out and leave, ain't it, though?"

They emerged from their strange tunnel through a hole in the side of it, that had been burnt that day, for the ashes were yet warm. As the two arose to their feet, a dark form rushed from the deeper shadows of the wood and seized them each by the arm.

"Who is this, Gerty? Will I strike?"

"No—no. It is Kate—our friend."

"Don't talk," said the central figure of the flying group, half-bearing them along. "You will need all your breath for running."

They were silent, and ran very well considering the rugged nature of their path, and having successfully passed around the camp, got on the way to the city.

CHAPTER XII.

GERTY'S MOTHER.—CONCLUSION

Judge Cornell and lady, on receipt of the intelligence that Gerty had been found, flew with the utmost speed to Black Rock, as the steadfast girl would not leave her charge to go to them. I need not describe the meeting. The parents were more excited than the child. Her interest centered in Bill, and by force of sympathy she soon gained their interest for him too.

"Thank Heaven they love each other!" exclaimed Kate, involuntarily, and the proud parents started and stared at her, and then stared at each other, and then Mrs. Cornell took the impulsive girl by the arm and drew her from the boy a very unwilling prisoner.

"Gertrude," she said, rebukingly. "Gratitude is an excellent thing, and it is very right to be rejoiced, but you occupy now a different station in life. You are my daughter and must be regardless of propriety. Come, I wish to speak to you."

The judge took Gerty firmly by the arm and led her from the room.

"I will be back, Bill," she cried, on the threshold, and then her mother, following, shut her from his view.

"I am very glad you are well, my boy," said Kate, approaching the head of the bed upon which Bill was lying, recovering from the effects of a murderous blow given him by Montcalm a short time before the meeting of Gerty and her parents, and pressing his hand kindly.

"Thank you! Thank you, Kate," he said. "It's all along of your good nursing."

"Do you like Gerty, Bill," she said, turning rather abruptly.

"You bet. I like her better than any one I ever knew. Liked her better than any one else when she was a boy."

"Do you—love her?" she asked in a startling manner, leaning toward him, and Bill was startled accordingly.

His cheeks flushed and his eyes wandered away from those of his questioner.

"Well, Kate," he stammered, "you know fellers like me never have much to do in the love line—it's all tow-line with us—"

"Do you love Gerty?" was the interruption.

"By George, I b'lieve I will if I don't look sharp—I—I b'lieve I do, now."

"And would you love her still if you were an heir and she was poor?" asked the woman, eagerly.

"Wouldn't I, though!" cried the boy, with a joyous brightness lighting up his face. "That's the way it should be, rich men lovin' poor girls."

"Hush!" said Kate, "they are coming back."

As she spoke Judge Cornell and his wife came into the room, leading Gerty between them, sobbing bitterly; and when Bill saw that, he was for jumping out of the bed, but Kate restrained him, and whispered him to wait.

"My boy," said the judge, in the full death-sentence elocution, "my duties call me away, and my wife and I have brought Gertrude to say good-by to you. She is going East to improve her education. We are all very grateful for any services you have done her, and you shall be liberally paid for them. You need never want while I live. I am sorry you have suffered so much, but I have ordered that everything shall be done to alleviate your pain and hasten your recovery."

"This is wrong—villainously wrong!" cried the doctor, entering the room. "What can be more inhuman than to excite the lad in this manner and on the very verge of his recovery! Shame! shame!"

"We will retire," said the judge, petulently, "since our presence is distasteful. We will take this exciting miss along with us."

"Wait—you shall not take the child."

It was Kate who had spoken, and now she stood between the parents with their prey and the door of the room, with the tears streaming down her cheeks.

"Who—who presumes to say we shall not take her?" cried the judge and his wife in a breath.

"I do—I claim the child; I cannot see her suffer."

"You, woman!" vociferated the judge. "What claim have you?"

"I am—her mother!" said the woman slowly, dropping her head upon her breast.

"You are mad!"

"I was mad—driven to madness, Judge Cornell, by the wrongs heaped upon me by your nephew—"

"Then you are—"

"I am Catharine Mint, wife of Reginald Nelson."

"His wife!" cried Mrs. Cornell and the judge.

"Yes," cried the woman, holding her head erect in the convincing queenliness of truth, "his wife, before recording Heaven!"

"Why, woman, you were turned from my service for not being his wife."

"I suffered that wrong and bore the shame to please the traitorous liar who told me the old, old trick of his fortunes depending on the secret of our marriage being kept. I did not know the world, and was deceived. I have learned its ways since then."

"If you were in truth his wife, why did you leave him, to wander crazed with gipsies?"

"I was crazed by his abuses and revilings that it was I that caused his feud with you. I scorned, even half demented as I was, to accept of grudging support from an unwilling ruffian. What could I do? No one would give a maniac work. I wandered wild at large, I fled the habitations of uncharitable civilization, and found both sympathy and comfort with the outcast wanderers of the forest."

The judge and his wife looked from the girl to the boy, and Gerty took advantage of their divided attention to burst away and rush to Kate, throwing her arms around her and laying her head upon her bosom.

"You are my mother, Kate," she sobbed. "You must be my mother, for you are the only mother of them all that cares about my happiness."

"If there is any truth in this story," said the judge, sadly, "we are in the depths again, dear."

"It is as true as gospel."

"But the child!" exclaimed the judge; "explain that mystery. I heard you a short time ago thank Heaven that this canal boy and Gertrude loved each other. What did you mean by such an expression in reference to such mere children—and of such different stations?"

"I have claimed Gertrude as mine, and their stations at the present moment are equal."

The effect of this declaration of equality was electrical, there was freedom in the sound, and Gerty flew to Bill like a needle to a magnet. Perhaps it was the force of circumstance—modesty considered—that hindered him from flying to her.

"They are relatives and born to love each other," said Kate, looking fondly at the two.

"Relatives?"

"Yes. She is the daughter of Reginald Nelson, your nephew

"And he?" exclaimed the judge.

"Is your son?"

"My son!" cried he, rushing toward the boy, but his habit of caution restrained him. "This must be explained. It needs proof before I will believe it," he said, and the very nervousness of his manner showed how ready he was to receive proof and be convinced.

"Your child and ours were changed at birth. That briefly is the explanation of the mystery. Reginald was smarting under your displeasure, I, under sense of your injustice. Your child would be born to wealth I thought, and mine, equally pure and innocent, condemned to poverty, and for no fault of mine. That thought tortured me—that unsettled me—that was the beginning of my craziness. A settled wish grew on me—a wicked and revengeful wish that your offspring should share the bitter lot that you decreed for mine. Think one moment and you will not blame me—it was human—it was motherly."

Mrs. Cornell sobbed, and the judge acknowledged the force of her words by blowing his nose very vigorously, in order to get an excuse for a wipe at his eyes with the corner of his handkerchief.

"My mother—Mrs. Mint—Mother Mint they call her now," said Kate, and there was a general, or nearly general start at the name.

"She was a midwife and served you, Mrs. Cornell, in that capacity, and as nurse after my discharge from your service. She was pitted at my wrongs, and knew my innocence from wrong, and I easily persuaded her to take my girl babe, then newly born, and exchange for your child, a boy. Your own fastidiousness as to the employment of a doctor aided her plan. She for the time was mistress of the house—your husband—all obeyed her. How easy was it then for her to smuggle in my infant girl without your husband's or the servants' knowledge—how easy in your state of half-insensibility to effect the change unknown to you. That change was effected. You kissed my girl, believing it to be your child—and offered up a mother's thanks to Heaven for the gift. Your infant boy was brought to me, and woman's pity made me tender to him. There is proof in the last exclamation of the boy himself—he was raised by Mother Mint as my child and her grandson. Now you have the truth, and I pray you to forgive my share in this for the sake of it ending, by Heaven's help, so happily."

"But why, after substituting the child, did you steal her afterward?"

"It was in my demented time—I hardly knew what I did. I loved her, and I could not live without her," said the woman, fervently, holding out her arms; and the girl who had repelled the millionaire's wife rushed joyously to the embrace of the ill-clad wanderer, impelled by the mysterious power of nature.

"The reason why I gloried in the dawning of their love, was that through him I found my child, who had been re-stolen from me by Reginald; and saw how self-sacrificing, how kind, how true he was to her even when he thought she was a boy, with no claim upon his heart but that of being weaker than himself. 'Twas then when I discovered, in spite of all the disadvantages in which my act had placed him, how good, how brave, how noble, how generous he was—"

"Awh! dry up, Kate!" roared the subject of the eulogy, from the bed. "That's too thick for stirabout. You're making Rhodie blabber like a whale."

There were others blubbering besides Rhodie; and Mrs. Cornell and the judge both hastened to the bedside to embrace their son. They asked for no more proof. The eloquence of the woman they and theirs had wronged had stirred the depths of their hearts, and the "one touch of nature made them kin."

"It was then that I determined on his reinstatement," continued Gerty mother, as soon as a proper regard for the prevailing emotion would permit. "Is it a wonder, when this reinstatement would leave my child—a girl—exposed to biting and laborious poverty, that I should thank Heaven for their mutual affection?"

"No, no, no! You are a noble woman, Catherine. Forgive us for the suffering our severity has caused you. Gerty shall still be a child of ours, and—and—let the youngsters manage their own future. Doctor, what do you think of the patient?"

"Oh, I think he's improving rapidly," said the physician, "and, by my word, the youngsters seem to be able to manage their own present as well as their future. Ha, ha!"

"Take the conclusion of every other melodrama, this must have startling 'effect'—not so much for the effect as that justice

may be done. On the stage they use blue lights to make the characters ghastly, or red ones to make them demoniacal, but we will proceed by the plain, pure light of day to view things in their natural colors. Let us accompany Judge Cornell and Mrs. Catherine Nelson to the abode of the latter's mother, Mrs. Mint.

The house seems silent and dead; but that does not surprise any one in the neighborhood, for the eccentric habits of the old woman are well known, and she holds converse with few. They rap, and try the door, but there is no answer; and yet Kate can hear sounds within as the clinking of gold coin, and a sort of low chuckling. She divined the cause at once. The old woman had been drinking.

"You must excuse me for bringing you to be disappointed, judge," she said; "but I fear the old woman will not be able to give satisfaction to-day. She has a failing—"

"Don't mind, don't mind," said the judge; "any time will do! No absolute necessity at all, but mere matter of form, to save future trouble when we are gone."

"Please, missis," said a little boy, coming from the alley-way, "the back window's open, and the people has sent for the police to see what's the matter."

"Heavens! what can it mean?" cried Kate, and she called through the window and keyhole. "Mother, mother, open the door! It is me—Kate!"

She only received chuckles for answer.

"She has gone crazed living alone so long," she said, with a shudder.

At this time the police arrived, and one of them promptly put his shoulder against the door and burst it in. The room was dark, and not until he caught the heavy, opaque curtain and pulled it down could they distinguish the surroundings. A horrible scene met their eyes when they could see.

Mother Mint lay on her back on the floor, in a pool of coagulated blood, and the embossed brass handle of a bowie-knife standing with the blade buried in the woman's breast. In her long-used chair at the table sat Joe Tivers, her nephew, alias Armand Montcalm, a driving lunatic, toying with the gold coin in the wretched woman's treasure drawer, lifting it aloft in handfuls and letting it trickle down again on the heap, laughing all the time idiotically at its tinkle.

When the police entered, the miserable creature threw himself forward with a whine like a beast, covering the treasure with his breast, and clutching the ends of the table with his emaciated hands.

This was the would-be murderer of Bare-Back Bill, for whom the police had been on the lookout for days, sitting in the heart of a great city, by the side of the evidence of his greatest crime, horribly overtaken by his guilt.

"It's mine—all mine," he screamed, "there was no will. I thought it was a will, and killed them both for nothing—for nothing. It was all mine anyway. He wasn't her grandson—he was nothing to her. There's the paper proves it. He's the son of Judge Cornell. That's what I thought was a will. That's what made me kill them both for nothing."

One of the policemen lifted the paper indicated by the maniac off the table, and handed it to Judge Cornell. It was a sworn statement of the identities of Gertrude Nelson and William Cornell, and the complete corroboration of Kate's story of the changing of the children in the confession of Mother Mint written in the fear of approaching death.

There is little more to relate. The judge and his lady were already prepared for such proof, which only assured without increasing their joy. The unfortunate Armand Montcalm was torn from the gold, the greed for which steeped his hands in blood, and driven him mad; he was confined in a lunatic asylum, and died there shortly afterward.

Kate and Gerty were both adopted by Judge Cornell, and after a few days' enjoyment of the happiness of re-union the young people were sent to different seminaries, the one to begin the acquirement of education, the other to finish; and, to be brief, when that is accomplished and the proper years attained by both it is a settled plan that the torch of Hymen shall be reflected from the bosom of classic Erie.

Bill's comrades of the tow-path were greatly rejoiced on learning of his good fortune, and no way envious because they themselves are still condemned to brave the discomforts and dangers of the "raging canawl." Many a rude serenade from the decks of passing boats has awakened the echoes of the grove surrounding Cornell House, and many a time have Bare-Back-Bill and Little Rhodie been wished good luck and happiness in the bright coming future.

[THE END.]

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